

*Landscapes of Repair: the Role of Photography and
Film in Documenting the Legacy of Modern and
Contemporary Architecture and Public Spaces*



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Bernd and Hilla Becher: Records of loss

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Abstract

The art duo Bernd and Hilla Becher, renowned for their focus on documenting obsolete industrial structures destined to disappear, gave birth to a work at the intersection of different genres, which contributed to revolutionizing the course of late 20th-century photography. In the present work, the inherent documentary value of their photographs will be highlighted, while also shedding light on a shifting perception of landscape appreciation, particularly related to the iconic exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, in which they participated as the only two Europeans among ten artists. Consideration will be given to how their work contributed to the development of industrial archaeology in the Ruhr, where their systematic documentation of vanishing industrial sites played a crucial role in redefining heritage preservation. The case of Zeche Zollern, an Art Nouveau industrial complex in Dortmund, will be examined as a concrete example of how their photographs influenced the recognition and conservation of industrial heritage. Finally, their work will be contextualized within contemporary environmental discourse, particularly in relation to the Anthropocene, emphasizing how their images raise critical questions about sustainability, the transformation of post-industrial landscapes, and the evolving relationship between industry and the environment.

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Introduction

The life-long collaboration between Bernd and Hilla Becher gave birth to a work at the intersections between different genres, which contributed to revolutionizing the course of late 20th century photography.

Bernhard Becher (1931–2007), called Bernd, was born in Siegen, in an area of Northwest Germany rich in mines and steel plants. He studied drawing and painting in Stuttgart and then graphic and printing techniques in Düsseldorf, where he met Hilla Wobeser (1934–2015)¹. Born in Potsdam, she had instead trained as a photographer and was already working as such when she started to attend the Art Academy, where she was asked to help to set up a little department of photography². Their cooperation started in 1959, inaugurated by a first project on the loom houses built in the second half of the 19th century by immigrants employed in local factories in Siegerland³. After that, their interest expanded to other categories of industrial installations, such as water towers, coal bunkers, winding towers, breakers (ore, coal, and stone), lime kilns, grain elevators, blast furnaces, steel mills, oil refineries and factory facades. They began to take photographs in Germany, particularly in the Ruhr region, but then they started traveling also abroad on board their Volkswagen van, visiting England, France, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, and even the United States⁴.

The aim of this article is to highlight the intrinsic documentary value of their work. Beyond capturing the technological transformations of an era, their photographs reflect evolving perceptions of the industrial landscape. Their approach aligns with the themes of the seminal 1975 exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, in which they participated, drawing attention to the complex relationship between industry and the environment. By systematically documenting industrial sites, their work not only preserves a visual record of vanishing structures but also engages with broader questions of memory, identity, and cultural heritage.

A striking example of this impact is Zeche Zollern, an Art Nouveau industrial complex in Dortmund. Once threatened with demolition, its historical and architectural significance was reassessed in part due to the Bechers' photographic documentation. Today, it stands as a museum and a symbol of industrial reconversion, illustrating how their work extends beyond mere documentation. Their systematic archive has actively shaped the discourse on preservation, demonstrating how photography can function as both a tool for historical awareness and a catalyst for reimagining industrial heritage within contemporary urban and environmental narratives.

1 Susanne Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen* (Schirmer/Mosel, 2005), 12.

2 Hilla Becher, "Hilla Becher in Conversation with Thomas Weaver," *AA Files*, no. 66 (2013): 24.

3 *Ibid.*, 35.

4 *Ibid.*, 36–43.

Finally, their work demands reconsideration in the context of the Anthropocene. Their photographs, which trace the transformation of landscapes at both local and global scales, invite a recontextualization of industrial heritage within today's environmental discourse. By capturing the remnants of a disappearing industrial era, the Bechers' images raise critical questions about sustainability, the long-term impact of industry, and the future of post-industrial landscapes.

Records of loss

In 2013, on the occasion of an interview with Thomas Weaver, Hilla was asked about the seemingly different approaches characterizing her and her husband. The artist confirmed the impression of the British architectural historian, according to whom she seemed "to have a more chemical, physical fascination"⁵ with materials such as metal, whose "very nicely"⁶ combination with black-and-white photography she had already become obsessed with while assisting the photographer Walter Eichgrün⁷. Conversely, Bernd "appeared to be fundamentally interested in something that was disappearing"⁸. This was notably due to his deep familiarity with the industrial landscape, which had shaped his entire childhood⁹. His roots traced indeed back to the industrial region of Siegerland, where multiple generations of his family had been miners. Bernd's first artistic attempts to represent industrial structures date back to when he was young and involved drawing and lithography, sometimes painting (Fig. 1)¹⁰.

However, as he realized he could not keep pace with the rapid industrial changes, he shifted to photography. His initial ventures into this medium date precisely to 1957, when returning to his home to draw the ironworks, found it to be under demolition. He began thus to take snapshots with a 35mm camera to use them as the basis for his sketches or to assemble them together into collages¹¹.

Later on, when Bernd and Hilla started to work together, particularly in their early years, they further had to face the challenges posed by rapid industrial transformation. Of particular impact was for example the coal crisis of 1959, which – initially perceived by numerous analysts as a cyclical problem – signified the onset of coal's gradual decline. During the 1970s, the steel sector

5 Becher, "Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver", 23.

6 Ibid., 23.

7 Ibid., 20.

8 Ibid., 23.

9 Heinz-Norbert Jocks, "Interviews mit Bernd und Hilla Becher," in *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, Susanne Lange. (Schirmer/Mosel, 2005), 209.

10 Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 12.

11 When in 1958, while visiting a large Dada exhibition at the Kunstverein in Düsseldorf, Bernd discovered the collages that Paul Citroen had made in the 1920s, he decided to abandon this practice, convinced that he could not do them better. Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 33.



similarly encountered a period of turmoil¹². As a response to such changes, to which were added financial constraints, and organizational obstacles, they felt compelled to systematize their approach and focus on those buildings directly impacted by rationalization measures. In 1967, describing these circumstances, the duo indeed stated:

Unsere Arbeit ist, wenn man sie einigermaßen gründlich tun will, ein *Wettlauf mit der Zeit*. Bei der Auswahl mußten wir uns, eingeengt von finanziellen und organisatorischen Schwierigkeiten, sehr beschränken. Von den Gebäuden, die sich überhaupt fotografieren ließen, bevorzugten wir im allgemeinen die vom Abbruch bedrohten, die für Zeit, Gegend und Bauart charakteristischen und die technisch und optisch besonderen Exemplare¹³.

12 Stefan Berger and Jana Golombek, "Memory Culture and Identity Constructions in the Ruhr Valley in Germany," in *Constructing Industrial Pasts: Heritage, Historical Culture and Identity in Regions Undergoing Structural Economic Transformation*, ed. Stefan Berger, 1st ed. Vol. 38, (Berghahn Books, 2020), 199. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1850gh6>.

13 "Our work, if you want to do it reasonably thoroughly, is a *race against time*. In the selection we had to limit ourselves very much, constrained by financial and organizational difficulties. Of the buildings we were allowed to photograph, we generally preferred those threatened with demolition, those characteristic of the time, area and type of construction, and those that were technically and visually special." (My translation; my italics). Wend Fischer "Anonyme Industriebauten. Fotografische Dokumentation von Hilla und Bernd Becher." *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, no. 1 (1967): 868, as cited in Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 90.

[Fig.1]

Bernd Becher, *Eisernhardter Tiefbau Mine, Eisern, Germany, 1955/56*, Graphite and watercolor on paper.
© Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher.

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In addition to the individual's affective attachment to a particular landscape, through their photographs, the Bechers offer a reimagined portrayal of the pioneering aspirations of the 1920s and 1930s. According to Blake Stimson, the grand industrial edifices that once stood as symbols of the grandiose endeavors of collective existence, testaments to advancements in technology, society, and politics, "have aged and are now empty of all but memory of the ambition they once housed"¹⁴. Moreover, as asserted by Elissa Rosenberg, "photographs do not only interpret; they also implicitly define what we value in the landscape, and thus shape what we see."¹⁵ This aspect can be observed here in connection with the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, to which they took part in 1975 as the only Europeans out of ten. The exhibit took place at George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film in Rochester, in the State of New York and was curated by William Jenkins. The curator's aim was to present "a new documentary objectivity toward the contemporary landscape"¹⁶, which challenged the representation of the American landscape as that of Nature, whose romantic grandeur was pursued by photographers such as Ansel Adams. The exhibited images, whose central theme was the built environment, showcased landscape as a circumscribed, occupied and unspectacular territory. In the particular case of the Bechers, their focus was directed towards capturing industrial architecture that had lost its function over time, leading to its destruction or menaced to eventual disappearance. The presentation of their sequential photographs, organized in a consistent grid and captured directly in black and white, allowed to emphasize the intrinsic quality of these structures as "anonymous sculptures"¹⁷. In the interview with Weaver, Hilla mentioned that in addition to the anonymity of these constructions, she was intrigued by their state of "stasis":

As much as their silence and anonymity, the images that I like are always working against something – usually technology. Ever since I was a child, there has always been some new technological development: high-speed film, or smaller faster cameras that people could use while they move. I was always interested in something older, something more static.¹⁸

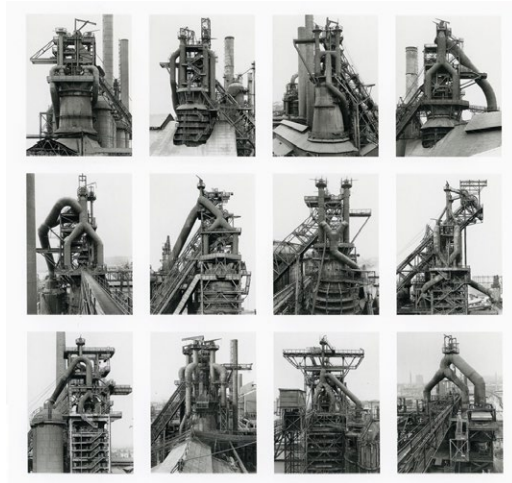
14 Blake Stimson, "The Photographic Comportment of Bernd and Hilla Becher," *Tate Papers*, no. 1 (Spring 2004), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/01/photographic-comportment-of-bernd-and-hilla-becher>.

15 Elissa Rosenberg, "Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape Aesthetic," *Heidelberg E-Books*, no. 24 (2018): 222.

16 *Ibid.*, 225.

17 *Anonyme Skulpturen: Eine Typologie technischer Bauten (Anonymus sculptures: a typology of technical construction)* was the title of their first publication in 1970. It was structured in seven chapters, whose subjects were lime kiln, cooling towers, blast furnaces, winding towers, water towers, gas tanks, silos. Later on some of them reached the stature of autonomous collections. It is also worthy to mention that "for the particular plasticity of their photographic work", Bernd and Hilla Becher were awarded the Golden Lion in Sculpture at the XLIV International Art Biennale in Venice in 1990.

18 Becher and Weaver, "Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver", 25.



The technology these pictures were “working against” was continuously renewing itself, “as in Nature where the older is devoured by the newer”¹⁹. Their pictures contributed to capture the gradual transition from a society rooted in industrial production and storage to one driven by a service-based global economy, tied to distribution and consumerism²⁰. In an interview of 1996, Bernd asserted:

Jede Fabrik produziert soviel wie nur möglich. Wenn sie überleben soll, muss sie wachsen. Fabriken werden immer größer, und die Leute glauben, die Möglichkeiten zum Wachstum seien unbegrenzt. *Aber nichts kann unbegrenzt wachsen*. Gerade als die Nachfrage nach Stahl nachließ, wurden die größten Stahlwerke gebaut. In Baltimore beschloss man, den größten Hochofen der westlichen Welt zu bauen. Dann kam die Stahlkrise. Sie waren Dinosaurier. Sie haben sich gegenseitig aufgeessen.²¹ (Fig. 2)

19 Blake Stimson, “The Photographic Compartment of Bernd and Hilla Becher,” *Tate Papers*, no. 1 (Spring 2004), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/01/photographic-compartment-of-bernd-and-hilla-becher>.

20 Rosenberg, “Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape Aesthetic,” 225; Francesco Zanot, “Bernhard e Hilla Becher,” in *La Fotografia dalla Stampa al Museo 1941-1980* vol.3, ed. Walter Guadagnini (Skira, 2013), 226.

21 “Every factory produces as much as possible. If it is to survive, it must grow. Factories are getting bigger and bigger, and people believe that the possibilities for growth are unlimited. *But nothing can grow unlimitedly*. Just when the demand for steel was slowing down, the biggest steel mills were built. In Baltimore they decided to build the biggest blast furnace in the western world. Then came the steel crisis. They ate each other up.” (My translation from German. My italics). Bernd Becher, “Die Musik der Hochofen. Bernd and Hilla Becher im Gespräch mit James Lingwood” by James Lingwood, *artpress*, No. 209 (January 1996), in Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 1992.

[Fig.2]

Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Hochöfen*, 1970-1989, 12 silver prints, 40 x 30 cm each, overall dimensions 172 x 189 cm. © Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher. [Years and locations have been added on the base of: Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher, *Typologien*, (Schirmer/Mosel, 1990), 92-93.]

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In the context of this research the adversative clause "Aber nichts kann unbegrenzt wachsen", which sounds in English as "But nothing can grow unlimitedly" can not go unnoticed. It echoes in fact the publication of the Club of Rome's 1972 *The Limits to Growth*, shedding light on the limits in terms of resource availability, environmental degradation, and the planet's carrying capacity, which exponential economic and population growth can encounter. Although, following the art historian Gisela Parak, *New Topographics* exhibition – and thus also the Bechers by extension – can by no means be considered "green"²², it aligns with a growing societal concern for the environment. The focal point on how human actions influence the landscape can be in fact interpreted as a form of "cultural expression on landscape, nature, and environment"²³. It may be envisioned as a reaction to the ecological challenges arising from a century of industrialization, urbanization, rapid population growth, and globalization, which – as Parak reminds – from the 1970s led to the emergence of ecocriticism within the humanities²⁴.

Besides, another point that is important to keep in mind is that the types of industries depicted in the structures of the Bechers' photographs were not disappearing altogether. Abandonment and demolitions involved just some old fashioned buildings, due to structural changes in the industry, material crises or modernisation of certain structures. Yet, this seems rather obvious considering the current climate crisis. According to the IPCC AR4 (2007), it is very likely that most of the observed increase in global average temperatures since the mid-20th century are due to the observed rapid increase in anthropogenic GHGs concentration. Emissions of CO² due to fossil fuel burning are then virtually certain to be the dominant influence on this increasing trend²⁵. For what concerns Germany, after the Second World War it was called for the deindustrialization of the country. However, during the Cold war, its industrial base became too important for the West and as a result industrial production reached new heights, renewing emissions and pollution. A Statista survey dealing with a time span between 1970 and 2022 reports that Germany emitted 1043,4 million metric tons of carbon dioxide in 1970. The statistic reflects only those carbon emissions through consumption of oil, gas and coal (**GRAPH 1**). One of the main reasons for Germany's high emission levels is that coal is the most polluting fossil fuel²⁶.

22 Gisela Parak, *Landschaft. Umwelt. Kultur. On the New Topographics Transnational Impact* (Museum für Photographie Braunschweig, 2015), 90.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 IPCC 2007, *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report*. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, eds. Core Writing Team, Rajendra K. Pachauri and Andy Reisinger (Geneva: IPCC, 2008), 39. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar4/syr/>.

26 Ian Tiseo, "Carbon dioxide emissions in the European Union 1970–2022, by selected country", Statista, 11 July 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/806887/carbon-dioxide-emissions-co2-emissions-european-union/>.



These remarks for Germany particularly apply to the Ruhr industrial area. Bernd and Hilla Becher expanded their work to the region in 1963, photographing in the Gutehoffnungshütte in Oberhausen and the Hüttenwerk Duisburg–Ruhrort as well as in numerous mines²⁷. The following picture represents for example the cooling tower of the “Victoria Mathias” colliery in Essen (Fig. 3). A cooling tower is a heat dissipation system which, by exploiting the natural principle of evaporation, rejects waste heat to the atmosphere, allowing a mass of water to be cooled, making it usable again²⁸. The structure stands against a neutral background, whose even diffused lighting was due to the fact that the Bechers took their pictures during the winter or spring months. The image is dominated by a feeling of stasis, however this impression should not be generalized. The same Hilla once pointed out that:

Many people mistakenly think that we photographed the Ruhr industry when it was already decaying, but this is not true. It was at full power. Of course, there was a kind of disappearance of certain old-fashioned structures, or an updating and modernising of parts that were damaged during the war, but the industry itself was still incredibly active.²⁹

27 Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 37.

28 *Ibid.*, 61.

29 Becher and Weaver, “Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver”, 23.

[Fig.3]

Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Kühlturm*, ca. 1950, Zeche “Victoria Mathias”, Essen, Ruhrgebiet (Cooling tower, ca. 1950, “Victoria Mathias”, Essen, Ruhr District), 1963, gelatin silver print, 19,53 x 19,4 cm. © Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher.



This is clear by looking at this photograph taken in Essen in 1964, where only two chimneys can be distinguished in a cloud of smoke shrouding the entire frame (Fig. 4). This picture serves to depict the subject matter of Christian Möller's article "Bürger für einen blauen Himmel über der Ruhr. Clemens Schmeck und die Interessengemeinschaft gegen Luftverschmutzung" ("Citizens for a blue sky over the Ruhr. Clemens Schmeck and the Interest Group against Air Pollution") published within the pages of the journal *Forum Geschichtskultur Ruhr* in 2022³⁰. The rapid reconstruction after the Second World War and economic growth in the 1950s led to a swift upsurge in air pollution levels. The release of soot, dust, and sulfur dioxide – a toxic byproduct of fossil fuels burning – became a detrimental issue for inhabitants of the industrialized region of the Ruhr. The deleterious effects of these airborne pollutants manifested in fact in the form of an alarming escalation in cancer cases, respiratory afflictions, and cardiovascular ailments. Moreover great damages extended also to agriculture, forestry and buildings. Those affected protested against this in submissions and petitions and thus drew the attention of politicians to the abuses, but without the situation improving. As historian Franz-Josef Brüggemeier has observed, although the vast majority of working-class residents had previously prioritized work above all else, they had by this stage become unwilling to tolerate the prevailing levels of pollution and were no longer prepared to acquiesce in them.³¹ Growing public awareness of the pollution problem produced political pressure for change, and it is worth recalling Willy Brandt's resounding promise of 'a blue sky over the Ruhr' during the 1961 national election campaign, where he ran as leader of the Social Democrats³². Of central significance in this period of upheaval were the voices of scientists and doctors, who publicly drew attention

30 Christian Möller, "Bürger für einen blauen Himmel über der Ruhr. Clemens Schmeck und die Interessengemeinschaft gegen Luftverschmutzung," *Forum Geschichtskultur Ruhr* 13 no.1 (2022): 34–36.

31 Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, "A Nature Fit for Industry: The Environmental History of the Ruhr Basin, 1840–1990," *Environmental History Review* 18, no. 1 (1994): 45–51, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3984744>.

32 *Ibid.*, 44; Möller, "Bürger für einen blauen Himmel," 35.

[Fig.4]

Walter Moog, *Dunstglocke über Essen mit Zinkhütte*, Essen, Germany, 1964. © Walter Moog | Fotoarchiv Ruhr Museum [In: Möller, Christian. "Bürger für einen blauen Himmel über der Ruhr. Clemens Schmeck und die Interessengemeinschaft gegen Luftverschmutzung." *Forum Geschichtskultur Ruhr* 13 (2022), 35.]

to the dangers posed by pollution, as well as the efforts of various citizens' associations. As Möller underscores, Dr. Clemens Schmeck played a pivotal role in this struggle. In 1962 he established the "IG schmützt", an initiative that garnered substantial public attention right from its inception, boasting a membership of over 300 individuals by the mid-1970s³³. Fliers distributed in Dortmund in 1971 displayed an index finger tarnished with grime, accompanied by the inscription "Your lung... is as dirty as your windowsill!"³⁴. Schmeck passed away in 1984, but it wasn't until 1992, after environmental protection had become commonplace in Germany, that the interest group disbanded. This same year *Beyond the Limits*³⁵, the sequel of *Limits to Growth*³⁶, was published. In this follow-up the third out of three conclusions drew in the previous report, while still considered valid, was rephrased and strengthened as follows:

A sustainable society is still technically and economically possible. It could be much more desirable than a society that tries to solve its problems by constant expansion. *The transition to a sustainable society* requires a careful balance between long-term and short-term goals and an emphasis on sufficiency, equity and quality of life rather than on quantity of output. It requires more than productivity and more than technology; it *also requires maturity, compassion, and wisdom.* (Meadows et al., 1992, p. xvi)³⁷

In this regard, the case of Ruhr is pointed out by several observers as a successful example of transition towards a more sustainable society. Once the biggest industrial agglomeration in Europe, the process of phasing out coal culminated in 2018 with the closure of the last coal mine. The region's eco-restructuring showcases a remarkable case of a well-managed transition, emphasizing the importance of regional actors and factors, alongside external triggers³⁸. Such transformation encompasses the development of sustainable economic endeavors centered around renewable technologies, research, innovation and ecotourism. The revival of a deteriorated landscape has been a crucial factor in the area's economic and physical revitalization, where the establishment of the Emscher Park especially stands out³⁹. Then, another crucial point is that current aspirations harmonize with the region's industrial heritage,

33 Ibid., 36.

34 Ibid.

35 Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, and Jørgen Randers, *Beyond the Limits: Confronting Global Collapse, Envisioning a Sustainable Future* (Chelsea Green, 1992).

36 Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers, and William W. Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth* (Universe Books, 1972).

37 Mick Common and Sigrid Stagl, *Ecological Economics: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 246.

38 Philipp Schepelmann, René Kemp and Uwe Schneidewind, "The Eco-restructuring of the Ruhr District as an Example of a Managed Transition", in *Handbook on Sustainability Transition and Sustainable Peace*, Hexagon Series on Human and Environmental Security and Peace, ed. Brauch, H., Oswald Spring, U., Grin, J., Scheffran, J. vol 10. (Springer Verlag, 2016), 593–612. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43884-9_28.

39 Regionalverband Ruhr (RVR), *Emscher Landschaftspark*, accessed August 30, 2025, <https://www.rvr.ruhr/themen/oekologie-umwelt/startseite-emscher-landschaftspark/>.

which over time began to meet with its identity⁴⁰. A notable example is the Zollverein Coal Mine in Essen, which has been included in the UNESCO World Heritage list as part of this transition process. Since 2001, it has been a venue for cultural and outdoor events, attracting over a million visitors annually⁴¹. In conclusion, it is then important to underscore that the initial efforts to preserve industrial heritage, driven by social movements inspired by the events of 1968, actually also involved the participation of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Their photographic documentation played in fact a pivotal role in advancing the cause for the safeguard of the art deco machine hall of Zeche Zollern in Dortmund⁴², a landmark of early industrial modernism designed by Bruno Möhring in 1902/03. Combining Jugendstil elegance with innovative steel-frame construction, the hall is especially celebrated for its striking stained-glass portal—an architectural feature without parallel in Europe's industrial landscape⁴³. The Bechers' photograph of the machine hall captures its architectural elegance and industrial significance, reflecting their distinctive style – central, sober, and meticulously composed (Fig. 5). This endeavor led to the successful preservation of the coal-mining facility, which now stands as one of the eight former workplaces encompassed by the Westphalian State Museum of Industrial Heritage. Through a diverse range of events and exhibitions, Zeche Zollern interweaves historical themes with contemporary issues, breathing new life into these structures⁴⁴. The museum frequently hosts exhibitions and events related to landscape and environmental concerns. For instance, the exhibition *Hidden Costs. Ewigkeitslasten* (2021/2022) featured the photography of J Henry Fair, shedding light on the environmental consequences of the mining industry.⁴⁵ Another significant exhibition, *Die Zukunft im Blick. Ruhrgebietsfotografien aus dem Bildarchiv des Regionalverbandes Ruhr* (2021/2022), explored the transformation of the Ruhr region's landscape through historical photography⁴⁶. These efforts demonstrate the region's commitment to sustainability, culture, and heritage, ensuring that its industrial past remains an integral part of its future in a more conscientious and sustainable way.

40 Berger and Golombek, "Memory Culture and Identity Constructions in the Ruhr Valley in Germany," 202; Rosenberg, "Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape Aesthetic", 225.

41 See: Zollverein, <https://www.zollverein.de/besuch-planen/was-ist-zollverein/>

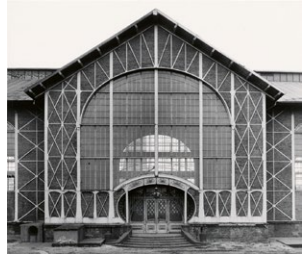
42 Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichte erzählen*, 38; Berger and Golombek, "Memory Culture and Identity Constructions in the Ruhr Valley in Germany", 202; Rosenberg, "Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape Aesthetic", 225.

43 LWL Industrial Museum, *Machine Hall at Zeche Zollern*, accessed August 30, 2025, <https://zeche-zollern.lwl.org/de/ausstellungen/maschinenhalle/>.

44 LWL Museums of Industrial Heritage, accessed August 30, 2025, <https://www.lwl-industriekultur.de/en/>.

45 LWL-Museum, Zeche Zollern, "Hidden Costs. Ewigkeitslasten. Fotografien von J Henry Fair, 23.10.2021 – 6.3.2022," accessed March 30, 2025, <https://zeche-zollern.lwl.org/de/ausstellungen/hidden-costs/>.

46 LWL-Museum, Zeche Zollern, "Die Zukunft im Blick Ruhrgebietsfotografien aus dem Bildarchiv des Regionalverbandes Ruhr 19.6. – 24.10.2021", accessed March 30, 2025, <https://zeche-zollern.lwl.org/de/ausstellungen/die-zukunft-im-blick/>.



Conclusion

In conclusion, the photographic legacy of Bernd and Hilla Becher offers a profound reflection on the evolving relationship between industrial heritage and contemporary landscapes. Their systematic documentation of industrial structures does more than capture technological transformations; it reveals the socio-environmental consequences of industrial decline and invites viewers to reconsider the long-term impact of industry on both local and global environments. By aligning their work with the principles of documentary objectivity, as exemplified in the New Topographics movement, the Bechers transcend mere architectural documentation. Their images function as powerful instruments of historical preservation, prompting a broader public awareness of the importance of safeguarding industrial heritage.

The Bechers' work not only preserves memory but also engages critically with contemporary discussions about adaptive reuse, sustainability, and the cultural significance of industrial sites. A compelling example of this can be found in the preservation of Zeche Zollern in Dortmund, a coal mine captured by the Bechers. Thanks to their photographic documentation, the site was preserved and ultimately integrated into the Westphalian State Museum of Industrial Heritage. This act of preservation has allowed the site to become an emblem of the region's industrial identity, affirming the importance of remembering and honoring the past. Here, documentary photography serves as more than a tool of recollection—it becomes a means of revitalizing and safeguarding collective memory, ensuring that industrial landscapes are not forgotten, but instead reimagined as valuable components of cultural heritage.

The Bechers' approach resonates with broader environmental and cultural concerns of our time. Their scientific and taxonomic rigor, mirrored in the fields of ecological and architectural studies, underscores the need for sustainable preservation efforts in an age marked by the challenges of the Anthropocene. In this way, their work aligns with ongoing discourses about landscapes of care, where photography acts as a bridge between the built environment and the public, fostering a shared understanding of our environmental responsibilities.

Ultimately, the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher continues to shape contemporary dialogues on industrial heritage, demonstrating how photography can function as both a tool for documenting and preserving the past, and an act of care for the future.

[Fig.5]

Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Colliery Zollern II*, 1971, gelatin silver print, 34,9 x 40,5 cm. © Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher.

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