Auzat aluminium smelter
Ariège, France

The journey
Aluminium production began at Auzat in 1907. By the turn of the 21st Century, the smelter, powered by hydro-electricity, was producing 48,000 t per year but poor economics and out-dated technologies led to the site no longer being sustainable, and it was closed in 2003.

After 1982, Pechiney stopped investing in several of their small production sites in the mountains, and talks about closing many of these operations began as early as the mid 1990’s. But whilst closure was not entirely unexpected, the eventual closure of Auzat was sudden and fiercely contested by the workers.

Protests following the announcement in January 2003 of impending closure included demonstrations, damage to the site and the eventual taking hostage of the site manager for several hours. In March the workers exercised their right (under French labour law) to withdraw from operations, arguing that the working conditions were unsafe surrounding the supply of electricity for the electrolysis process. The site was never opened again and when Auzat formally closed in November 2003, 220 employees lost their jobs. A social plan, put together at the end of 2003, redeployed some staff into other Alcan plants (particularly Lannemezan), but saw others made redundant or take early retirement. Pechiney also reduced activities at two neighbouring sites in Ariège, bringing a total of almost 300 redundancies to the area.

The site of an aluminium smelter has been transformed into a professional athletics track and sports training facilities. The project was realised through a long and on-going collaboration between Alcan/Rio Tinto Alcan, the local community, and the local, regional and national regulators.

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In January 2004, Alcan (who had just taken over Pechiney) made a firm commitment to help with the economic revitalisation of the region, signing an agreement with the French local government and the community of the surrounding towns and pledging 1.2 million Euros to encourage the creation of local jobs. This commitment was in addition to the work required to decommission the site and remediate the land that had been impacted by inorganic fluorides used in the manufacturing of the aluminium.

Discussions on potential options for the site were long and protracted. It took another 18 months before demolition started at the Auzat site and decisions for its future weren’t made until several years later – although many different plans were discussed during this period. Four years after the site was closed, a compromise was found, supported by Alcan and validated by the French Administration. A long-term lease of the land was drawn up between RTA and the town of Auzat, with a formal handover of the infrastructure to the community in June 2010 and the official opening of ‘La Plaine des Sports’ in May 2011.

The period between closure of the smelter through to the inauguration of La Plaine des Sports was therefore almost 8 years; a long process. But it ensured that everyone was on board and that the final outcome was a widely popular redevelopment.

The transformation

The site of the former smelter at Auzat has been dismantled and the ground cleaned up, levelled and capped. The building housing the former historical electrical power station has been sold to the community, restored, and is now the base for a number of small businesses. The infirmary located at the edge of the site was symbolically sold to the municipality in 2009 and transformed into a weights room.

With the complex being situated at elevation within the Pyrenees, visitors can also enjoy the stunning natural landscape surrounding Auzat, using the village as their base. Great efforts have been made to provide opportunities for the general outdoor enthusiast, and visitors to the town can also find many hiking trails, or try their hand at canyoning, caving or climbing various Via Ferrata. The influx of this new type of visitor to the town is likely to lead to more lodgings and restaurants being needed and thus, a thriving tourist industry could develop alongside the core project.

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The negotiations took many years but the time spent was invaluable with the resulting plans for redevelopment being widely popular throughout the local community.
The dominance of the aluminium industry over the past century is celebrated through a 2km aluminium walkway that threads its way through the village. Along the path are art installations (including a 3 metre high aluminium slab), machinery from the former smelter and interpretation panels. Ex-employees participated in its making. Le Chemin de l’alu is a self-guided path that starts and ends at the Le Barri – Maison des Patrimoines, or Heritage House. Le Barri houses a permanent exhibition on Auzat’s aluminium story and is the centre for information on the town’s heritage, offering space for conferences, films, documentaries and a base for site visits.

**Highlights**
The RTA team were mindful of the volatile atmosphere after the abrupt closure and dedicated a great deal of time and effort into ensuring that all voices were heard, and as many needs as possible, were met. The negotiations took many years but the time spent was invaluable with the resulting plans for redevelopment being widely popular throughout the local community.

RTA took the lead on the revitalisation process, but the key stakeholders including local government and community groups played a crucial role in the dialogue, all working together to find a solution. Auzat’s mayor is central to the Auzat story. He participated in the wave of discontent that dominated the town after the works closed, he was involved in all the negotiations about the town’s future, and La Plaine des Sports was fundamentally his idea. When the plans for the sports complex were developed and the new agreement had been signed, he was proactive in leading the community in understanding the potential of the project. He continues in his role of Mayor of Auzat and Ariège department councillor, and is very proud of the new site.

Whilst Auzat’s relatively remote location provided a challenge, it also proved to be a critical factor in the success of the project. The elevation of Auzat (737m) lends itself to excellent conditions for mid-altitude training for professional athletes. This, combined with an unspoilt mountainous landscape, created an ideal setting for the outdoor enthusiast, and the numbers of visitors to the region are predicted to increase.

One of the leading alternative options for the land that the community asked for was a large hotel complex (3000 beds). The RTA team were able to demonstrate how, as a single solution for the revitalisation of Auzat’s economy, a hotel was not economically viable and therefore not a sustainable option. It was also not a desirable use of the previously contaminated land in the context of French environmental law.

Instead, it was agreed that moving the existing sports facilities across from the other side of the river over to the old smelter site – and improving them – provided an ideal solution for the capped land. It also freed up a large area of (uncontaminated) land that could be developed into a hotel complex, should the visitors increase as a result of the new sports complex development.

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Lessons learnt

The community at Auzat is relatively small and many worked directly or indirectly for the smelter. When the site closed, a sizable portion of the village and its surroundings were directly affected. The fact that the closure was sudden further compounded the subsequent unrest. For any redevelopment to be successful, the local population needed to be part of the process, turning the negative atmosphere into constructive energy.

With the benefit of hindsight, given that Pechiney knew that the closure of Auzat was highly likely as early as the mid 1990’s, discussions with the workforce and the local community should have started long before closure. It is quite possible that the situation was not as simple as this at the time – particularly with the changes that were happening at a company level to both Pechiney and latterly, Alcan. Early and comprehensive communication surrounding the possibilities of closure are recognised as essential components of site closure today.

Auzat’s physical transformation is paralleled with a similarly positive transformation in the local community. From a very hostile situation at the outset, the local population has not only come to terms with the closure of the aluminium smelter, but has fully embraced the new facilities.

When designing a project on an old industrial site, it is important to recognise the significance of the former industry to the local community. Memories are shared within the community and can generate a sense of pride in the past. By weaving Le Chemin de l’Alu throughout the village, Auzat celebrates the past while looking to a new future. It is essential to record a comprehensive history of a site, and good practice to retain individuals who have a knowledge and interest in its history.

It is important to really believe in a project if it is to be a success. Individual characters play a vital role in the success of a project. Identifying these characters can be an unpredictable process – but worth pursuing.

By not selling the land and renting/leasing it instead, RTA are able to manage, monitor and control whatever is developed on it. They take a backseat role once the new use is established but they continue to be a key part of any discussions on further development, thereby protecting their reputation.

The RTA team were able to demonstrate that the hotel option was not economically viable. They sought a solution that ensured minimum impact on the land and long term viability. A key lesson is to think long term, and not look for a quick fit.

In order to keep the local community onside, and ensure that they profit from the redevelopment, it is important, if the expertise is there, to try to use local resources when a third party is needed.

Proper budget and financing are essential ingredients to success, and good co-financing helps ensure long-term viability, sharing the responsibility for the project’s success.

Our Vision

We aim to ensure that our legacy sites are made safe, that all problem areas are addressed cost-effectively, and that there is a sustainable socio-economic future for the community together with a minimised aftercare burden.