

“Building our community”. The roots of Olivetti’s industrial city (1934-1945)

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In the 1930s and 1940s the debate raged in Europe over the scientific organisation of work, its shockwaves affecting huge swathes of Western political, social and economic thought and technical culture; this entered the much larger issue of the search for new corporate horizons, interwoven with the developments of the Taylorism movement that were able to orient the course of the industrialised countries after the crisis of 1929. Taking into account the contemporary experiences of the US TVA and the Soviet Gosplan, the discussion was rooted in an original way to the terrain of the plan and planning - at all levels of organisation, from the factory to society - intercepting the architectural debate of the international avant-garde.

This debate took on significant and original forms and outcomes in Italy in the actions of Adriano Olivetti, the Piedmontese industrialist (1908-1960) who ran his father’s typewriter factory of the same name in 1934: the individual and political intentionality sustained by Olivetti is comparable to the experience of the same time of Tomáš Bat’a (whom Olivetti knew and whose work he published in his magazine “Tecnica e Organizzazione”, within an original reflection on the role the factory should perform).

From 1934 to 1943, the year when he was interned on account of his antifascist activities, Olivetti promoted various major initiatives in Ivrea: innovation in production, the construction of new buildings for production entrusted to young modern architects; innovative solutions relating to social services, kindergartens, public housing and original and innovative proposals such as that on regional planning promoted by the Aosta Valley Planning Scheme (1934-1937; 1943), all actions that took an original place within the major issues being debated involving sectors of fascist politics, modern architects and intellectuals of various tendencies in Italy in an extensive process of modernisation of the country, which was to be concluded at the threshold of the economic boom of the 1960s. Alongside constructions and projects, Olivetti also opened various cultural worksites, organising magazines (“Bollettino di fabbrica”, “Giornale di fabbrica”, “Tecnica e Organizzazione”, “Comunità”) and a publishing house (“Nuove Edizioni Ivrea”, later to be called “Comunità”), which after WWII published texts and volumes that were part of the renewal of the Italian culture of the latter half of the 20th century.

This paper focuses its attention on the roots of the Olivetti experience in the years before and during the Second World War, highlighting continuities and discontinuities with Bat’a’s model through the filter of the debate over the scientific organisation of work; it analyses the channels of circulation of models and proposals that offered Bat’a and Olivetti examples and techniques for the construction of their industrial cities from the thirties onwards; it renders explicit the roots of community thought proposed theoretically and politically by Olivetti after the Second World War, recognising them in the Fordist experience of the 1930s and in the preparation of the political text “The Political order of communities”, in which the factory becomes the pivot of an innovative proposal of political and territorial representation, thus paving the way for Olivetti’s experiences in the public and state sphere as Vice-President of UNRRA Casas, United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation (1948-1954), as President of the Italian National Institute of Urban Planning (1948-1960) and as head of the political (local and national) movement “Comunità”.

From the methodological perspective the paper places the accent on the need - for case studies such as those of Bat'a and Olivetti - for multidisciplinary readings that are prepared to shift the attention from the biographies of individual personalities towards prosopographic interpretations of intellectual and technical groups, with a greater awareness of the protagonists' generational details in the reconstruction of cultural horizons and modernity in the 20th century.

Patrizia Bonifazio (1964) teaches urban history at the Politecnico of Milano-Leonardo Campus. Her area of expertise is the history of the industrial city of the latter half of the 20th century, devoting particular attention to the exchange between the cultures of the project. With close reference to the topic proposed in the paper, she directed the exhibition "Constructing the City of Man. Adriano Olivetti and Italian Urbanism" (Ivrea, Milano, Roma, Lausanne, 2001-2003) and was scientific curator and historical-critical consultant for the activities of the Open-Air Museum of Modern Architecture in Ivrea (1997-2001); she is currently the scientific curator and coordinator of the works of the National Committee for the Centenary of the Foundation of the Olivetti Factory, which promotes the project for the appreciation of Ivrea's 20th-century architectural heritage, with a view to having the city recognised as a Unesco site. With Alessandro De Magistris, she was the curator of the International Conference "War Perspectives. Architecture and Planning in Italy and beyond (1937-1945)" (Politecnico of Milano, January 2010). Her most recent publications are: with Elena Cogato Lanza (editors), *Les experts de la Reconstruction*, Geneva, 2010; with Alessandro De Magistris, *Tra corporativismi e pianificazione. La cultura tecnica e le idee del piano in Europa tra le due guerre [Between corporativisms and planning. Technical culture and the ideas of the plan in Europe between the wars]*, Special Issue of the magazine "Le Culture della Tecnica", proceedings of the seminar of the same name (in the press).

She is preparing a volume on the architecture and urban planning of the second half of the 20th century in Italy, seen through the filter of the exchange between the emerging enterprise culture and architectural culture, entitled, "Olivetti / Ivrea. Factory culture and architectural culture between the 1930s and the 1970s" (Milano 2011).