

Industry and the urban center

Foreword

by Anna Maria Stagira

«A shipyard [that] is truly a nation, not only in its essence or effect. Or even more than a nation, [it is] a female womb where the seed of mathematic calculation is sown and, one by one, entire generations of ships are born to sail the seas of the world».

The Genoese poet, Giorgio Caproni admits to hyperbole in describing the Ansaldo shipyard in Sestri Ponente. And yet, how to portray the dimensions of a shipyard that produced transatlantic ocean liners? How to capture in words the time to build them and the thousands of common laborers who worked on the docks?

In the first half of 19th century, Sestri Ponente was a small agricultural town of 5000 residents. The Cadenaccio brothers had already built a small dockyard for the construction of wooden ships. The Grand Hotel accommodated the well-born and fashionable who chose to spend their summers at the Ligurian seaside. A few decades later, with the establishment of the Ansaldo shipyard, workshops, mechanical plants, and a tobacco factory, Sestri became a **blue-collar town** (annexed to Genoa in 1926), squeezed between neighbouring cities and densely populated (in the 1930s the inhabitants exceeded 37.000).

But Sestri Ponente wasn't simply a town that grew up around the factories. It became an industrial suburb that literally learned to dwell «in the shadow» of huge ships in their construction bays, rising up over the houses behind the shipyard.

Sestri Ponente clearly demonstrates the multi-faceted interaction between industry and the urban center. On the one hand, intense confrontation between workers and employers took place (a significant example is the 1950 labor union dispute, during which time, workers occupied and ran the shipyard, completing the construction of the motor tanker *Volere* and beginning the project for a turbine steamship. On the other hand, here was a community proud of their part in building luxurious liners and great warships sold throughout the world. Sestri lived according to the rhythm and pace of the shipyard.

A culminating event in the life of Sestri was the launching of a ship, a time of lively celebration for all the town. But even at that moment, uncertainty lingered about future orders and therefore, the livelihood of the shipyards. Following each launch, many workers hurried to recover tallow and cast iron scraps for resale, to make ends meet. (as well explained in *Immagini e spazi urbani. Sestri Ponente 1880-1960*, Electa, Milano, 1986).

In this section of **Culture e Impresa** , we offer further reflection on this subject with the article «*Un poeta e un pittore in visita ai cantieri dell'Ansaldo*» (A poet and a painter visit the Ansaldo shipyard), by Giorgio Caproni, with sketches by artist Renzo Vespignani, as well as a film clip and 12 photos from Fondazione Ansaldo film and picture archive.