

The Online Center for the Industrial History of Northwest Italy

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Aims

The Center for Industrial History and Culture is a permanent project dedicated to the multimedia promotion of the history and culture in the northwest Italian regions of Piemonte, Liguria and Valle d'Aosta, starting from 1850 up to the present. It represents an upgrade of the courses already available on the website www.storiaindustria.it.

The Center aims to provide a highly interactive virtual museum that offers the visitor instant access to a vast array of textual and figurative materials. Any item can be selected and organized according to the visitor's interests, something that no other actual museum of industry can offer. What's more, this type of "structure" can be visited simultaneously by thousands of visitors at any time.

The Center was created in July 2007 by the CSI-Piemonte, the inter-academic association which, for 30 years, has worked to improve regional public administration activities and the quality of school and training services through the ITC. The center has received financial support from the Compagnia di San Paolo for the years 2007 and 2008. Any institution may support the Center and donate archival material as long as its contributions are pertinent.

The aims of the Center are to:

- promote northwest Italy's historical and industrial culture in schools, universities, territorial institutions and work associations;
- offer young people diverse educational experiences about business history, technology and work, as well as the possibility of selecting and personalizing their online experience;
- provide stimulating new opportunities to study working life in the factory;
- create a shared network of archives, documentation centers, business museums and other associations;
- use up-to-date multimedia instruments and technologies (with the invaluable help of the teaching staff) in order to develop on-line methodologies for the teaching of history; encourage the availability and the use of the records preserved in various institutions; and foster cooperation among students, professors and researchers.

The Idea

The website www.storiaindustria.it grew out of the idea of offering schools and universities free on-line courses in order to encourage the exchange of existing knowledge and the production of new knowledge about the industrial history of northwest Italy. This project was realized by the CSI-Piemonte and implemented at the end of 2004 with the financial support of the Compagnia di San Paolo and in cooperation with the Fondazione per la Scuola, one of the operating organizations set up by the Compagnia.

The courses – divided into 12 themes regarding industrial culture and covering 12 industrial sectors – reconstruct the history of factories, products, professions, working methods and the organization of companies in a territory with a longstanding industrial tradition. Not only are the courses a useful resource to support teaching and research activities, but also a significant tool to explore a wide variety of related themes: from advertising to architecture, publishing and telecommunications.

The course contents are based on original texts written by scholars, which are then elaborated and integrated with records and images provided by archives and companies, or contextualized through internet paths based on FAR methodology (Open-Assisted online formation) developed by the *Dipartimento di Scienze della Formazione* at Turin University. Thus users have access to scientifically reliable materials that are constantly updated thanks to a system of shared participation in which many people and organizations cooperate to produce contents and multimedia contributions.

As of February 2008, the website has offered over 2000 published pages, 2500 records, 1200 links to online paths with an average of 45,000 visits per month. It also has an extended network of cooperation with many archives, foundations, associations and businesses, all of whom have decided to share and by so doing, to raise the value of their historical records.

The Center's Resources

Many institutions have contributed to the project with their resources: the Compagnia di San Paolo, the Fiat Historical Archives, the Turin Historical Archives, the Amma Historical Archives and the Ansaldo Foundation, each with one representative, to the new online Center for Industrial History and Culture, a dedicated structure whose aim is to enrich the contents of the project and attract greater interest. Although the Center was created by the CSI in July 2007, it took several months to develop a new portal that allowed access to the more recent innovative functions.

The publication of a new website in March 2008 marked the transition from the pre-existing courses to the current wide range of resources and tools of the Center. It now offers a point of meeting, exchange and online cooperation to a range of publics: universities and the scientific community, businesses and industrial world, schools, archives, foundations and local institutions.

The website offers:

- new multimedia courses, enlarged and enriched, as well as new virtual “narrative” paths using, for example, the reading of images;
- support to schools in order to create teaching programs and organize refresher courses for teachers in the field of the online teaching of history;

- databases for consulting original historical records (digital archives), for carrying out bibliographical research, for learning about the heritage of industrial museums, local archives, industrial associations and trade-union organizations;
- an area dedicated to the world of research with Web resources, online dissertations, reviews, etc. The specific goal is to initiate and sustain an online historiographical debate;
- a shared “wiki” system for editing texts and collecting materials or original records; thereby fostering the development of a community with interests in history and business culture.

Among these offers, supported by state-of-the-art technologies of the CSI-Piemonte, the digital archives deserves particular attention. It is an online database for consulting original records, considered particularly relevant for the reconstruction of the industrial history in the Northwest of Italy. It collects and files official documents, minutes, cash-books, reports, photographs, drawings, films, posters and publishing materials preserved in diverse sources such as archives, records centers, companies, foundations and associations. Hundreds of records were made available in the digital archives from the very first opening of the online Center.

Through the digital format, the user can seek out and view records preserved in many different institutions. For example, it is possible to virtually rebuild the history of a company, to create a digital collection of posters from different historical periods or to compare the evolution of techniques and organizations in specific fields. By joining sophisticated ways for consulting the data with online research functions, the instrument is invaluable for research and teaching purposes, but also for a wide range of users with different interests or levels of expertise.

The digital archives is growing, thanks to the cooperation of archives and companies that have made their materials available to the CSI, providing a means to promote knowledge of their industrial heritage, to enhance its value and identify links among the various contents. To build the database, the digital archives employs a personalized version of the application Guarini Archivi, an instrument adopted by historians and archivists alike.

A Participatory Philosophy

The realization of a project with such a broad scope is possible thanks to the cooperative efforts of many different participants. In the schools for example, the students are not only recipients of the courses, but they also contribute by producing contents to which the portal has dedicated a special section. Students find and analyze sources or records, and they also design specific Web sites about local industrialization that will eventually become part of the main website.

In adopting the participatory philosophy of Web 2.0, the Center increasingly uses many of its functions—wiki, social bookmarking, and syndication—so that anybody who is interested in the industrial history and culture of northwest Italy may have a more active role in research, production, sharing and publication of resources and contents.