

International Conference on Company Towns in Europe

By Maria Paola Borgarino

Organizers and Promoters

On the 14th and 15th May 2009 at the Milan Polytechnic, the international workshop “*Experiences in heritage management transformation. Company towns in Europe*” was held, organized by the Doctoral degree course in Programming, Maintenance and Renewal of building and urban systems of Milan Polytechnic in cooperation with Docomomo, the international committee for documentation and conservation of buildings, sites and neighbourhoods of the Modern Movement.

The two-day workshop provided an occasion to formalize a range of existing interests and activities. At the end of the two days, the participants established a network among professionals who deal with the renewal/regeneration of historic residential neighborhoods and share an open and dynamic vision of the heritage role.

The seminar took place together with the consulting activities carried out by the research group coordinated by Prof. Paolo Gasparoli and Prof. Stefano Della Torre of the B.E.S.T. Department (Buildings, Environment, Sciences and Technology) on behalf of the Municipality of Capriate San Gervasio, member of the Piloting Committee for the drawing up of the management plan of Crespi d’Adda (with Regione Lombardia, Adda Nord Park, Bergamo Province, General Management for Cultural and Environmental Assets of Lombardia, Unesco Group and B.A.P. – Beni Architettonici e Paesaggistici – Superintendence Office in Milan). The seminar was an educational experience for graduate students and comprised part of the research activity of the group “*Governare la trasformazione. Esperienze di gestione strategica dei sistemi urbani programmati*” of which I am the director.

Topics and Aims of the Seminar

The seminar presented and compared some of the most relevant and topical renewal experiences achieved in European company towns and districts, once built to meet the housing needs of industrial workers. The proximity to production centers and to natural resources is a standard feature of all the cases, as is the careful planning by urban services. Districts were conceived to support the inhabitants for all their daily needs and to deal with all aspects of the workers’ social life including free time. The houses, whether independent, attached or in line were

constructed according to economic, hygiene and rationality criteria and with better services than today.

Despite essentially uninterrupted use, it is unusual that the traditional aspects—that is, ownership in common, the link to industry, social solidarity and common services—are preserved. Buildings do not answer to the needs of the population who live there and disjointed building initiatives have multiplied. Transformation is a necessary step to guarantee the transmission of the values of building to future generations, but it is also necessary to monitor the tendency to dispersion of the heritage. This implies improving the assets, preserving the original identity and activating a virtuous mechanism of economic valorization and social growth. Activating a virtuous process means, first of all, involving the inhabitants in shared decisions based on the rethinking of their needs and on the recognition of the complex values inherent to the construction.

Case Studies

The first day, organized in two sessions, took place in the Aula Rogers of Politecnico. The morning was dedicated to the districts registered in the World Heritage List Unesco, and therefore required to have a management plan; while the afternoon session focused on presentations of the districts that are already object of the project Momoneco. The choice of the case studies gave preference to those that showed determination to implement a strategic process.

After the welcome and the sponsors' opening remarks regarding the territorial significance of the initiative (Rotary club- Committee for the restoration of the dams of Adda and BCC Cassa di credito cooperativo di Treviglio), Prof. Valerio Di Battista, chairman of the morning session and coordinator of the Doctor's degree program, introduced the main theme of the conference, and pointed out the need to link each consideration about preservation to its relational context. He affirmed that while relationships are mainly functional, they also create settings and unique identity systems, both of which require regeneration projects that are well thought out.

Architect Dennis Rodwell, expert in heritage management strategies and consultant for many Anglo-Saxon sites, presented the industrial site of Darley Abbey, an instrument of management modified over time to consider important cognitive developments. Architect Franz Jashkle then presented the management plan drawn up in 2008 for the inscription of the site "Berlin Modernism Housing Estates" in UNESCO's list, and the restoration of Bruno Taut's buildings. Prof. Stefano Della Torre introduced meaningful considerations on Crespi D'Adda: the reconversion of the dismantled industrial structures and the restoration of the link with energy sources will be the crucial points of the management plan under construction.

The afternoon session, coordinated by Prof. Paolo Gasparoli, was dedicated to the management strategies adopted in cases not recognized by Unesco, yet active in the valorization of modern districts. The coordinator highlighted the need to relate the work on the residential patrimony to the rethinking of the industrial areas, once again bringing the attention of the speakers back to one of the key themes for the drawing up of integrated management systems.

Rurik Wasastjerna, an architect who has worked with the Finnish district of Sunila, showed the renewal work on the buildings, while highlighting the social role of the project realized by Alvar Aalto. Even without an official preservation structure, the renovation work redefined the living spaces to modify a property conceived for small families to the needs of big families who value the environmental characteristics of the area. Prof. Ola Wedebrunn spoke of the Bellevue Bellavista experience, where Arne Jacobsen planned houses but also places for amusement, sports facilities and free time facilities offering an unusual model of architecture designed for the society. Prof. Henrieta Moravčíková spoke about the Slovak experience of Bat'ovany – Partizánske, one of the

many villages built all over the world to accommodate the workers of the footwear industry, Bata. The complex, where many forms of prefabrication were experimented, now lacks an adequate conservation policy and gives rise to contrasting feelings in the inhabitants themselves, who responded positively to the involvement in the project. Prof. Patrizia Bonifazio concluded the general outline of Momoneco experiences speaking of the Ivrea experience, which, following the innovative experience of the open-air Maam-Museo with modern architecture, is competing to obtain Unesco's recognition. Finally, Prof. Antonello Sanna presented urban renewal initiatives regarding housing, public spaces and productive structures with the incorporation of art installations. This case shows how it is possible, starting from a complex but shared view, to systemize virtuously various town planning instruments and financing occasions.

On the agenda of the second day, which took place behind closed doors and was coordinated by architect Andrea Canziani, there was a discussion on technical aspects of management. There will be an on-line publication of the meeting report.