

# The biopolitics of a Company Town: Shaping the Urban, Shaping Identities in Dalmine, Italy

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Since the Industrial Revolution, Industrialists promoted and funded the development of housing projects, infrastructures, and social facilities around the production sites, some of them known as company towns. The scope was twofold: the entrepreneur or the company built and managed the community following business and production needs and promoted social harmony and social cohesion, providing services and goods for citizens' consumption to enhance their living conditions urban health, where state services were not yet entrenched.<sup>1</sup> The company towns could be retained as a valuable case study to examine how the urban rationalities and living conditions were shaped by industry politics. For this scope, this paper attempts to discuss the extent of the industry biopower in the context of cities entirely constructed by one company, with the case study of the city of Dalmine, a seamless pipe mill founded in 1906 in Italy. To reach this goal, the company town of Dalmine is investigated through archival research with a subsequent thematic content analysis of the house organ *Conversazioni*, from the company archives collected during two research periods in *Fondazione Dalmine*. The archival and thematic content analysis yields two main findings: (a) the company town was planned as a self-sufficient container environment in which urban planning and welfare policies appear as an instrument to exercise its biopower over the citizens; (b) the industry dictated the rules of working-class housing construction and entered workers' domestic lives with the incursion of industrial governance into the most intimate spheres of citizens was key to moulding citizens' values.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The narrative of architectural modernism can be properly defined as a project of subject construction as a biopolitical expression.<sup>2</sup> This expression occurs not only in human bodies but also in the spatial configuration of the urban spaces. Foucault defended urbanization as the search for a new space, "a space of circulation" dominated by an increased flow of people and goods, high levels of informal social control, and a greater connection between the city and the surrounding landscape.<sup>3</sup> Standing on Stanek, it is conceivable to assume the "biopolitical project as a project of scalar organization of society, and urbanism as a project of the biopolitics of space".<sup>4</sup> The same rationale applies to the industrial modern city. Since the Industrial Revolution, Industrialists promoted and funded the development of housing projects, infrastructures, and social facilities around the production sites, some of them known as company towns.

The company towns are defined as cities founded by a single enterprise through social and economic pioneering methods in previously unexplored terrain, with its apogee between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The company operated as employers and landlords, as enforcers of security, promoters of social harmony, and as providers of services and goods for workers' consumption to enhance the living conditions and health of production sites and their surroundings. The industry had a primary role in the organisation of productive habitats by monopolising goods and services. The company towns had a plurality of expressions, influenced by the geographical area, economic context, and type of production.<sup>5</sup> As well, company towns are not merely a twentieth-century phenomenon: they appeared in Europe around the eighteenth century and were diffused in North America thereafter.<sup>6</sup> This city model spread until today, where it still serves as "pioneering devices" for colonization and market expansion in developing countries.<sup>7</sup>

### **The pursuit of quality of life in the modern industrial city**

In the search for the quality of life, twentieth-century company towns were planned as a self-sufficient container environment to manage social actions, and their modern biopolitical project was twofold. On the one hand, the companies built and managed the community following business and production needs. Its biopolitical project dictates the rules of working-class housing construction and influentially enters workers' domestic lives. Indeed, the industry's choices determined workers' lives, in which different levels of paternalism and corporativism touched the most intimate part of people's lives, showing an incursion of industry biopolitics into the most intimate spheres of modern man.<sup>8</sup> The biopolitical system moulded citizens' values, so that, the workers tended to reproduce discipline and norms in domestic contexts. Modern industrialization was a process of transformation of the *Homo Faber* in *Animal Laborans*, and of reduction of "social living" in "biological living".<sup>9</sup> The isolation and alienation of the individual were instrumental in maintaining the community in a state of need,<sup>10</sup> a growing machine that works in favour of regulation of the use of space.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the biopolitical project was expressed in space, when the company built services and goods for its inhabitants to enhance their living conditions by improving urban health with public hygiene as a new type of fluctuating need of the whole population.<sup>12</sup>

As presented above, the company towns could be retained as a valuable case study to examine how the urban rationalities and living conditions were shaped by industry politics. For this scope, this paper attempts to discuss the extent of the industry biopower in the context of cities entirely constructed by one company, with the case study of the city of Dalmine, founded in 1906 in Bergamo Province, Italy. In the first half of the twentieth-century, Dalmine reflected many characteristics of a company town: (a) it has been settled on an

agricultural and unexploited territory; (b) the production site was surrounded by welfare facilities for the employees, including housing and public and leisure utilities; and (c) this housing policy imposed residential segregation, an instrument the company used to exercise its biopower over the citizens-workers.

## 2. STUDY DESIGN

### Methods

To investigate the industry governability and its spatial rationality applied on the company town of Dalmine, the business archives have proved invaluable in understanding the space rationale behind the industry over the last 100 years. Internationally known as Dalmine<sup>13</sup>, the steel pipe company was established in 1906 between Milan and Bergamo by the German Mannesmann Tube Company with the financial support of Deutsche Bank and the Italian Metallurgical Society. In 1920 was renamed Dalmine S.p.A, under Italian management. When the city of Dalmine became a municipality in 1927, the mayor of the city was also the Manager Director of the industry, reflecting the intrinsic relation between the political power of the industry and the territory. After World War II, and the fall of Fascism in Italy, the industry gradually transferred the ownership of housing and welfare facilities to the city council. However, these transformations did not lead “to a radical discontinuity in its social policy”.<sup>14</sup>

To unveil this transition encompassed by the industry biopolitics, two main steps compose the methodology implemented: the archival research and its thematic content analysis, in a systematic procedure. For the archival research, the principal source of historical documents related to the company town of Dalmine is the archives of the Fondazione Dalmine, an entity founded in 1999 by TenarisDalmine to valorise and conserve the industrial heritage. I have conducted two research periods inside the Fondazione Dalmine archives, from May to June and from October to November 2021. The archives records conserve about 140,000 files, 100,000 photographs, 5,800 drawings and sketches, 900 objects, 900 audio-visuals, 2,000 historical volumes, and 6,000 current volumes.<sup>15</sup> Among the records consulted, particular attention was given to a series of house organs, *Conversazioni*, distributed from December 1954 (A. I, No. 1) to October 1981 (A. XXVIII, No. 4). The house organs were presented as an internal newsletter addressed to the workers and committed to supporting cordial discussions between employees and the direction of Dalmine.<sup>16</sup>

Subsequently, the analysis of documents gathered from the company archives followed the systematic procedure proposed by Bowen (2009), to individuate the recurrent subjects in the records analysed.<sup>17</sup> The chosen themes sought to identify the two main subjects: the urban space and the implication into the individual identities. Applying the method to the content analysis of the 172 house organ fascicles, two main strands of the biopolitical project in

the company town were extracted linked to (a) the spatial aspects and its urban project, and its implications in (b) the individual aspects, with themes related to the management of life of citizens, with e.g., educational, and recreational programs offered by the industry (Table 1).

Thematic Content Analysis

ASPECT	MACRO THEMATIC	MICRO THEMATIC
a) Spatial	Housing	Workers Managers Visitors
	Urban equipment	Mobility Landscape
	Agriculture	Food provision Land management Water management
b) Individual	Education	Kindergarten Primary School Technical School
	Health	Summer Camps Healthcare Nutrition program
	Leisure	Sports stadium Pool Tennis court Arts concourse

TABLE 1. The table summarizes the thematic content analysis by aspects, macro and micro thematic found. De Almeida Santos, 2022.

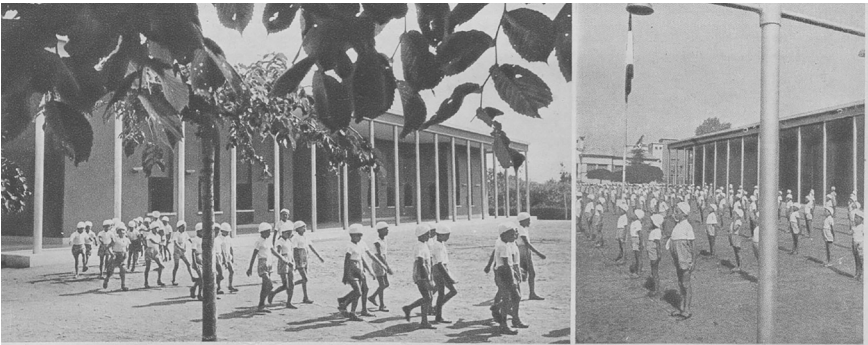


FIGURE 1. Giovanni Greppi, The Heliotherapy Colony in Dalmine, Italy. Dalmine S. p.A. (1956) *Conversazioni* (extract), Anno III, n.8, August 1957, p. 5. © Fondazione Dalmine Archives.

The house organ worked as a primary source to understand what strategies the industry used to promote the quality of life for its citizens. Divided into monthly fascicles, and with different section subjects, *Conversazioni* was mainly composed of iconographies (such as photos, illustrations, drawings) and texts with different content not only related to the industrial production, but mainly focused on the cultural activities, and the social works the industry.

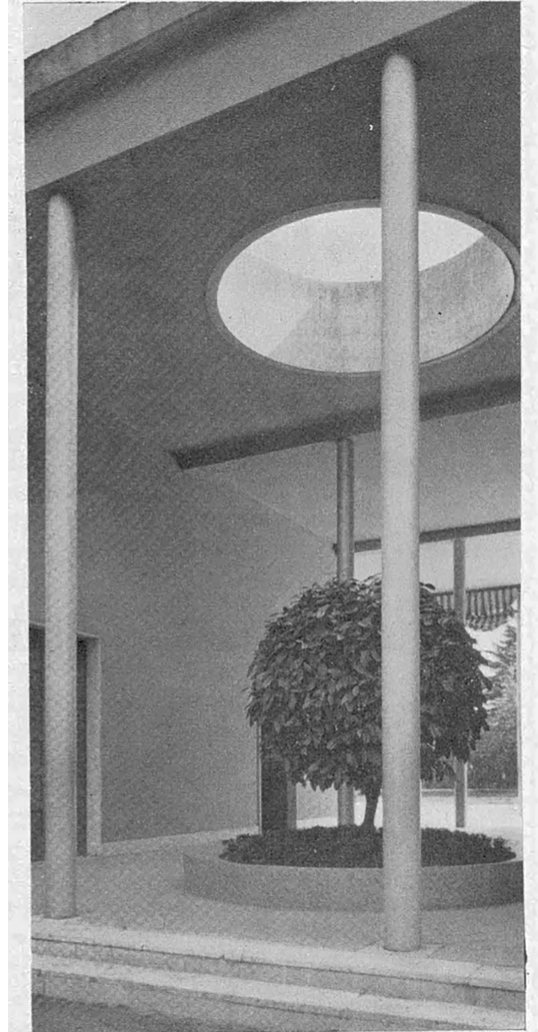
### Findings

The archival and thematic content analysis yields two main findings. First, the company town of Dalmine, through its urban planning and welfare policies appeared as an instrument to exercise its biopower over the citizens. Second, the incursion of industrial governance into the most intimate spheres of citizens was key to moulding citizens' values of the working-class housing construction and entering workers' domestic lives.

Two timeframes on the analysis were observed, regarding the past actions of the industry and promoting the new developments made by the company. Some articles in *Conversazioni* promoted the past legacy of the industry and its architecture and urban infrastructure and the different activities promoted by the industry from its beginning while other articles addressed the current and future inauguration of architectural, urban projects and welfare services (from 1954 to 1981).

### *Power spatialities in architecture and urban scale*

In Dalmine, almost all the buildings constructed between 1920 and 1959 commissioned by the industry are the work of the same Milanese architect: Giovanni



**Un angolo dell'edificio della colonia elioterapica della Pro-Dalmine S.p.A. in Dalmine.**

FIGURE 2. Giovanni Greppi, The Heliotherapy Colony in Dalmine, Italy. Dalmine S. p.A. (1961) *Conversazioni* (extract), Anno VIII, n.9, August 1957, p. 9. © Fondazione Dalmine Archives.



FIGURE 3. Giovanni Greppi, Planimetry with the urban development of Dalmine, Italy, 1955. © Fondazione Dalmine Archives

Greppi (1884–1960). By wisely using the pipes produced by industry as building ornaments, he managed to express an architectural style of Dalmine's industrial hegemony. In Dalmine, the industrialised product assumes another meaning: the seamless pipe became a column, a railing, an enclosure. Many of the *Conversazioni* articles that have dealt with the architectural and urban projects developed by Dalmine point to the rationality of the project as a fundamental factor. I give as an example, the heliotherapy colony, where the ornamental materials of the buildings use their own tubes produced within the industry (Fig. 1). The accurate description provided by the article from 1957 presents indicates that the building was constituted of “a central body and two side wings connected by a large, covered atrium with a 32-column Dalmine tubular frontal porch” (Fig. 2).<sup>18</sup> The company produced pipes inside the factory, and reproduced them outside, with the ornaments used in most of the architectural works designed by Greppi.

Dalmine was designed in two hierarchical residential neighbourhoods situated at opposite extremities of the city. Rents were strictly linked to the sta-

bility of the job and totally subject to the power and logic of the company (Fig. 3).<sup>19</sup> However, the two neighbourhoods designed by Greppi had one thing in common: the private garden for each housing unit, and boulevards, both inspired by the garden city.<sup>20</sup>

The entrance to the factory was the centre of everyday life: a converging point marked by the geometric and totalizing centrality of the factory.<sup>21</sup> The localization of different functions in distinct areas, the adoption of hierarchical residential building typologies, and the purpose of relative control of the transformation process of the territory reveal an urbanistic culture.<sup>22</sup> From 1955 to 1963, the company “built more than 590 buildings, supported by a public–private partnership in the framework of Ina–Casa and the European Coal and Steel Community”.<sup>23</sup> It denotes how Dalmine ranges from consolidated models of social works (*le opere sociali*) to public–private combinations in social housing until an “institutionalised urbanity” (Fig. 4).<sup>24</sup>

### *Leisure and quality of life*

To put in practice its social project, the company founded in 1935 the Pro Dalmine, a cooperative for management, trade, health, and leisure activities outside the factory, provided an articulated system of activities that constituted “a real connective tissue of a strategy of consensus–building and community creation”.<sup>25</sup>

Among the activities of Pro Dalmine for ensuring the quality of life in the company town of Dalmine, are mainly the maintenance of food and leisure time. In the cafeteria and the town market, the industry itself produced the food to be consumed by the workers and their families on the land under its management (Fig. 5). Workers and their families enjoyed leisure facilities, such as tennis courts, swimming pools, boccia courts and different championships promoted by the C.R.A.L. (Workers’ Company Recreation Centre) in the town (Fig. 6). The children were provided with various ludic activities, from kindergarten and primary school to health clinics and treatments to improve the respiratory conditions of the little ones (Fig 7).



FIGURE 4. An institutionalised urbanity: the company’s social works are reflected in the architectural projects in Dalmine, Italy. Dalmine S.p.A. (1955) *Conversazioni* (cover extract), Anno II, n.10, July 1955. © Fondazione Dalmine Archives



FIGURE 5. Production, humans, and non-humans cohabited under the health governance of the industry. The agricultural business led by the industry itself used the rural areas around the plant for food production. Dalmine S.p.A. (1962) *Conversazioni* (extract), Anno IX, July – August 1962, p.13. Special edition in colour. © Fondazione Dalmine Archives.



FIGURE 6. Different leisure activities offered by the company. *Conversazioni* (extract), Anno VIII, n.7, 8, July–August 1961, p.14. © Fondazione Dalmine Archives

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Even assuming a secondary role, the company contributed to the fact that the city still lives today between production and the legacy of the modern industrial city. While most Italian company towns have suffered decline and the



consequent cessation of activities in the 1970 and 80s, the company in Dalmine still plays the role as is an important driver of the economic growth and development of the city and its surrounding territories.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike most of the writings about Dalmine's case, through *Conversazioni*, it is possible to conclude that the biopolitical project did not end with the transfer of the municipality to a democratic government in the late 1950s. On the contrary, it maintained social and architectural projects for a much longer period. The industry as a regulator of territory doubled the space in favour of production, with the awareness that the space outside the factory was also essential to guarantee quality inside the factory. This demonstrates why in 2022 the municipality still functions in the municipality building, the poly-ambulatory in the poly-ambulatory, and the kindergarten still houses the same activities designed by industry. The Dalmine case is a shred of evidence that the policies applied in social control and general welfare continue as a living legacy of the modern biopolitical project.

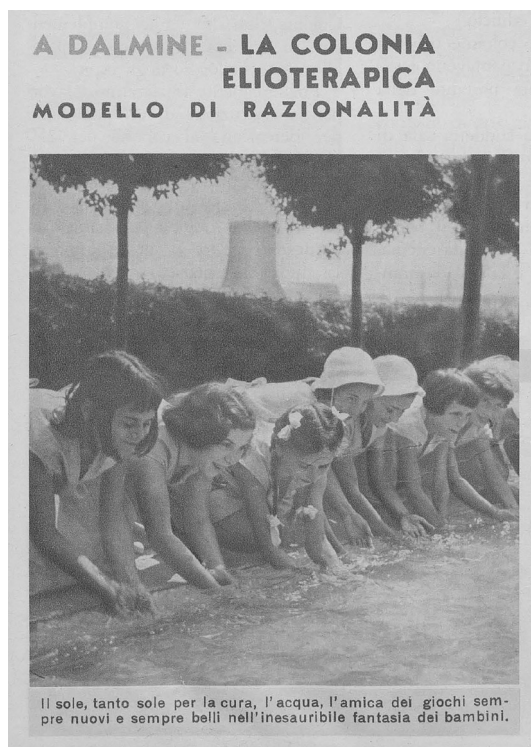


FIGURE 7. The rationality model is a premise for the Dalmine quality of life, Italy. *Conversazioni*, Dalmine S.p.A. (1957) *Conversazioni* (extract), Anno IV, n.7-8, August 1957, p. 12. © Fondazione Dalmine Archives.

## NOTES

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- 26 Nowadays, the economic and industrial development of the entire area benefits from the industrial presence of TenarisDalmine and its supply chain. The integration of the University of Bergamo (in the 90's), the creation of a technological centre to support start-up activities (in 1996) and the future inclusion of the city of Dalmine (and TenarisDalmine itself) in the "Innovation District" project "for the Dalmine-Bergamo redevelopment, with the coordination of centres of excellence and services for employees, enhancing corporate welfare opportunities" are proof of Dalmine's increasing centrality in the Bergamo Province.