

Unearthing Traces

Dismantling imperialist entanglements of archives, landscapes, and the built environment

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When the Industry Built the City: Business Archives, Memory, and Community in a Contemporary Company Town

Anna Karla de Almeida Santos

This short essay illustrates the role of the business archive in the transmission and maintenance of contemporary industrial culture, with a focus on the company town of Dalmine. In the context of Dalmine, the business archive managed by the Fondazione Dalmine emerges as a place of dialogue integrating historical documentation with the active memory of the community through collaborative and intergenerational projects and initiatives that promote the history of the town, which is, in part, the history of the industry itself.

The company town of Dalmine

Company towns are cities founded during the Industrial Revolution by single enterprises operating as employers and landlords, enforcers of security, promoters of social harmony, and providers of services and goods for workers to enhance the living and health conditions of the production sites and the surrounding settlements. This phenomenon was also prevalent in Italy, where fruitful social, historical, and economic conditions favored the emergence of various company town models, as in the cases of Ivrea or Crespi D'Adda. Although less documented, the city of Dalmine (located in the province

of Bergamo, in Northern Italy) represents another relevant archetype of the Italian company town. This is partly because the company is still active today and contributes to the construction of the town's identity while most Italian company towns suffered decline and the consequent cessation of activities in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Dalmine historical heritage began in 1906, when a steel-pipe manufacturing company (currently known as TenarisDalmine)¹ capitalized on the presence of a rural area lacking basic infrastructure to establish itself as the leader of urban development in the area, over time constructing all the major infrastructure that constitutes the city, including roads, sanitation, housing, and services. The company has maintained its political and social control over the territory since then, first by itself building—through the work of architect Giovanni Greppi—working-class neighborhoods inspired by the garden city principles,² and after—following the fall of Fascism and the end of the Second World War—building projects and initiatives in collaboration with city-government programs that strengthened the social fabric and drove social transformations. Note that over one hundred years after its foundation, the city and the industry continue to share the name, space, and close social and political ties, as if to stress the industry's relevance for the city of Dalmine itself.³

The business archive of the Fondazione Dalmine

The spatial, economic, and social activities of the company have been meticulously documented since its establishment, but it was only in 1999 that the company created the Fondazione Dalmine with the aim of safeguarding the heritage of the company town in the form of a business archive (fig. 1). The Fondazione Dalmine archives comprise about 140,000 files, 100,000 photographs, 5,800 drawings and sketches, 900 objects, 900 audiovisuals, 2,000 historical volumes, and 6,000 current volumes.⁴ These records include various contents such as housing and neighborhood masterplans, photographs of cultural activities provided by the industry, and technical and management reports, and they shed light on the city's industrial memory. Indeed, the business archive is the fundamental resource for unearthing the traces of the twentieth-century company town of Dalmine.

This postcard, dated from the 1970s, was given by a Dalmine resident and industry worker. It shows that little has changed about the former industrial settlements commissioned by industry. Source: Anna Karla Almeida, 2021.



The business archive, however, is not merely a private space in which the company traces and relives its past, but is an emerging place of dialogue, which seeks through numerous projects to involve citizens and create new memories of contemporary industrial culture. In this respect, the Fondazione Dalmine integrates the industrial records with the active memory of the citizens of Dalmine, searching through collaborative methods for new stories, materials, and personal anecdotes that can help keep its cultural identity alive for present and future generations.

Dialogues with local community

The company acknowledges that the history of the industry is the history of the city itself. The difference is that there is currently no unilateral exchange of records. Today, citizens and workers are active voices in an ongoing collaborative process “that welcomes diverse input, not an end-product (such as a finding aid) that presents an authoritative or definitive voice.”⁵ At the Fondazione Dalmine, city and industry intertwine in a dialogue in which “content, context and structure of record creation (are) inextricably bound together.”⁶ In this perspective, the business archives play the role of promoters of intergenerational cultural connections between the industry and the local community, offering free activities open to the whole community. In other words, through collaborative processes, the Fondazione Dalmine encourages a type of living archives that creates a bridge with the residents of Dalmine so that citizens can strengthen their connection with the local industrial culture. Two initiatives among the various projects undertaken by the Fondazione Dalmine are an authentic reflection of this strategy: The “Face to Face” project and the industry-funded 3–19 series of educational programs.

The “Face to Face” project revolves around photographic exhibitions organized by the Fondazione Dalmine.⁷ The community, comprising current and former workers, is invited to contribute by identifying traces of their past in the photographs exposed. Specifically, participants can identify themselves (or their family, friends, or colleagues) and their lived places in the photographs, writing notes next to each face and place displayed. In addition, the community can enrich the archive by donating their materials to the company archive. From

these exhibitions (and more than three hundred portraits and group photographs), the Fondazione Dalmine has conceived a virtual album that reconstructs a hundred years of history of the company town from the point of view of its protagonists.⁸ The archive thus becomes a sharing space that through collective memory processes, narrates the social changes of the city in its hundred years of existence.

The educational program 3–19 is another example of the intergenerational cultural connection between the archive and the community. Under this program, students from the regional schools can discover the history of the industry (and the city) of Dalmine through several activities comprising guided walks through the city, critical readings of the iconographic archive, and thematic learning labs. These activities have a dual function. On one hand, the younger generations familiarize themselves with the company's industrial heritage by learning about the economic and social history of the city. On the other hand, the company profits from these exchanges to develop its social project and integrate the contemporary needs and concerns of young people into its activities.

Some considerations

The outreach work of the Fondazione Dalmine archives to share the city's industrial heritage is a sign of the company's desire to transfer its cultural importance to future generations. The company's interest in continuing to record social activities and welfare services promotes the idea of community and redefines the concept of a company town in contemporaneity. The purpose behind these activities appears to be in keeping with the company's early role in the territory: an established consensus that the industry was and is a key actor preserving and sustaining the industrial legacy of the company town and, as such, should be recognized as a giver of well-being and cultural identity.

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- 1 TenarisDalmine, the largest global manufacturer and supplier of pipes and services for oil and gas exploration and production, is still an important driver of the economic growth and development of the city, the surrounding territories, and the whole country.
- 2 Davide Pagliarini, *La città paesaggio. 1925–2015* (Libria, 2016).
- 3 Carolina Lussana, Manoeel Tonolini, "Dalmine: dall'impresa alla città", in *Dalmine dall'impresa alla città. Committenza industriale e architettura*, ed. Carolina Lussana (Dalmine: Fondazione Dalmine, 2003).
- 4 Fondazione Dalmine. "Archivio," www.fondazionedalmine.org/it/archivio/, accessed July 29, 2021.
- 5 Michelle Caswell, "'The Archive' Is Not an Archives: On Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies," escholarship.org/uc/item/7bn4v1fk (UCLA, 2021).
- 6 Jeannette Bastian, "Reading Colonial Records Through an Archival Lens: The Provenance of Place, Space, and Creation", *Archival Science* 6 (2006): 269.
- 7 "Faccia a Faccia," www.facciaafaccia.org/en/, accessed July 30, 2021.
- 8 "Tenaris Today," *Faccia a faccia con la storia*, March 1, 2007.

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