



A PEARL OF INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY
SET IN A BEAUTIFUL NATURAL OASIS

VILLAGGIO CRESPI D'ADDA

Villaggio Crespi d'Adda is located at Capriate San Gervasio, along the border between the provinces of Bergamo and Milan, on the lush bank of the River Adda. Inscribed on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, it is an almost untouched testimony of the workers' villages established in Italy in the late nineteenth century, following the example of the urban settlements -suitable for the accommodation of all the workers of the same factory, realized in Europe since the middle of the nineteenth century.

VILLAGGIO CRESPI D'ADDA

Village Crespi was founded in 1878 by Cristoforo Benigno Crespi, born in Milan, whose parents from Busto Arsizio were artisans and traders of dyed fabrics. Cristoforo Benigno Crespi, an entrepreneur of the textile industry, after the foundation of his factories at Vaprio d'Adda, Vigevano and Ghemme, in 1877 bought 90 hectares of land between the towns of Capriate and Canonica d'Adda, along the banks of the river so as to use the water as a driving force; in this area he built what later became his most important cotton mill for size and quantity of artefacts pro-

duced, but he especially gained fame for having built the village around it.

Initially the job was done by the workers of his other factories and by the inhabitants of the surrounding valleys who, because of the distance and poor road conditions, usually had various troubles in reaching the working place.

The cotton mill started spinning in a single department, then gradually it became bigger, new weaving departments were created and the number of workers was increased.

So it became necessary to organize both day and night shifts. The need of working shifts inspired the founder to build a residential area around the factory, in order to house the workers and their families, thereby making it easier to comply with working hours and shift work.

At first they built some multi-family-type "barracks" that turned out not to be suitable, because not conformed to the rules on promiscuity and for the poor hygiene, infections, disorders related to night shift work and even for quarrels between the inhabitants.

The founder, however, was readily able to reorganize the residential areas with the aid of his first child, Silvio, who had experienced the workers villages in France, Germany and especially England. Silvio Crespi was firmly convinced that it was important for entrepreneurs to rely on workers' efficiency that mainly depended on their living conditions.

He thought that a long and tiring way to reach the working place could have negatively affected the workers' activity and even increase the risks of work accidents; to offer the workers a good treatment could have improved productivity, could have been of help to every individual worker and could even have avoided social demands: a sort of "do ut des". It was decided to adopt some types of semi-detached houses with a garden, built on the east side of the factory. In this way the rhythms of the workers' everyday life could have been adapted to those of the factory. More and more convinced that providing good living conditions to workers was a way to obtain more advantages from them, Silvio Crespi decided to enlarge the residential area and, in addition to workers' cottages and villas for the managers, other buildings were built to house the most important social services, thus creating a true "workers' town".

Villaggio Crespi has taken on a rational and functional urban aspect, in an architectural context of many styles: art nouveau style between classicism and romanticism.

The factory, located along the river, is in neo-medieval style characterized by a succession of almost elegant sheds with decorative bricks and terracotta.

It boasts a grand main entrance with a high smokestack, a large wrought iron gate surrounded by the superb buildings of the executive offices.

Next to the factory there is the Castle, residence of the Crespi family: in the fourteenth-century medieval style, it demonstrates the power of the master, but at the same time his protection.

The workers' houses, in the English style, are aligned to the east of the factory, along parallel roads.

The employees' houses and the managers' villas are to the south, the doctor's and the priest's residences overlook the village and maintain a neo-medieval style.

The Church, a small copy of the Renaissance Sanctuary of Santa Maria di Piazza by Bramante in Busto Arsizio, demonstrates Crespi's affection for the village. Along with the school, the church is placed in front of the factory.

The Village is equipped with recreational facilities, laundry, infirmary, a small hospital, public toilets, a general store and a theatre.

The cemetery, located at the bottom of the main road, at the end of the factory structure, deserves a special mention.

The cemetery, in an eclectic style, was built by the architect Gaetano Moretti who, on behalf of Crespi family, also designed the hydroelectric power plant of Trezzo d'Adda (now "Centrale Taccani"), a national monument. The centre of the cemetery is dominated by the Chapel Crespi, a tower-pyramid that rises almost to embrace the workers' graves, small and simple crosses lined up in a green lawn. It is worth mentioning that Village Crespi was the first town in Italy to get the public lighting through the modern Edison system. The Crespi family installed a phone line that connected their residence in the Village with their home in Milan; still now the telephone code of Crespi d'Adda is the same of Milan, although the Village is in the province of Bergamo.

The village and the factory belonged to the Crespi family up to the 30s and reached the number of 3200 employees for the production of yarns for cotton, satin and poplin distributed throughout Italy and abroad. Since 1931 the factory passed from one owner to another and finally ceased the production in 2004. In 1972, when the village was put up for sale, the inhabitants were able to purchase their houses. The villas and the castle were bought by private people. The public buildings were purchased in part by the Commune and Parish community. On 5 December 1995, Village Crespi was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List as an "outstanding example of the phenomenon of workers' villages, the most complete and best preserved in southern Europe". It is worthwhile to organize a visit to this particular village. Walking through its streets, it seems to be living in a timeless dimension, yet it is a normal town, close to the two major cities of Milan and Bergamo.

Here everything still looks as spontaneously ordered, as to follow the rules of the previous working life; if you

know just a little bit of its history, it is impossible not to feel embedded in the spirit of cooperation that has always characterized the life of its population.

The village is surrounded by lush vegetation, the vegetation of the characteristic banks of the river Adda, a succession of thickly wooded areas alternate to urban centre. We would suggest to complete the tour to the village with some walks along the river as well as a visit to the Santuario di Concesa, Villa Gina (home to the Parco Adda Nord) and Naviglio Martesana, on the road towards Lecco. If you go to Trezzo, you can see the Centrale Tacconi (the former Crespi hydroelectric power plant) and the ruins of the medieval castle of the Visconti of Milano; between Cornate and Paderno d'Adda, there are the hydroelectric power plants of Esterle, Bertini e Semenza while at Vaprio d'Adda, towards Milano, you can see Villa Melzi and the former Visconti di Modrone factory.

Cuisine

Crespi d'Adda follows the culinary tradition of Bergamo that finds here its highest expression in the "casoncelli" or "casonsei", a simple dish originated from the recovery of leftovers of meat. They are a sort of ravioli, and here is their recipe:

The pasta of the "Casonsei" (1 kilogram) is made with
800 g of flour "00";
200 g of durum wheat;
3 eggs;
water.

The "Casonsei" are stuffed with:
250 g of dry bread crumbs or softened in milk;
2 eggs;
150 g of Grana Padano cheese;
300 g of minced sausage;
200 g of roast beef;
10 g of "amaretti";
20 g of raisins;
1 Spadona pear;
spices (nutmeg, cinnamon, black and white pepper);
lemon peel;
garlic and parsley.

The sauce is made with butter, sage, bacon and grated cheese.

From the Milanese cuisine, Crespi d'Adda has acquired the recipe of the "ossobuco" or "oss buss", whose sauce is enriched with the "gremolata" made with parsley, garlic and lemon peel.

Getting to Villaggio Crespi

By car: highway A4 Milan - Venice, exit Capriate San Gervasio, then follow, for a few kilometres, the indications.

By train + bus: From Milan FS you can travel using the ATM line Gessate M2 - Trezzo.
From Bergamo FS bus lines to Trezzo.

By plane: Airport of Orio al Serio.

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