Visualising Deindustrial Ruins in an Oral History Project: Sesto San Giovanni (Milan)

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Introduction

In a special issue devoted to post-industrial oral history narratives, my contribution will focus on a photo gallery. Therefore, first of all, I have to explain why I am addressing the topic from this particular perspective. At the centre of interest is Sesto San Giovanni, a medium-sized city north of Milan that became the fifth largest industrial district in Italy after WWII, long recognised as “the factory city” or “the Italian Stalin-grad”. The photographs under consideration concentrate on the ruins of its big industries, built around the beginning of the 20th century and dismantled before that century drew to its close. The “part-time artist” Umberto Gillio,1 who took the photos, is an amateur photographer who has devoted his time and skills to collaborate in an oral history project carried out between 2013 and 2015, a project in which I acted as a principal investigator together with two independent scholars, Sara Roncaglia and Sara Zanisi. It was born from the idea to enhance the cultural memory of industry in Sesto, and intended the photo reportage to act as an important visual segment of the entire research. Umberto Gillio’s shots were meant to directly connect the photographic representation of former industrial spaces in Sesto the way they are preserved today with the oral testimonies collected in a campaign of interviews.

Our research has been funded by the Lombardy region2, and one of the main requirements of the call for proposals we applied to was the ability to reach out to a wider audience rather than to a strictly academic one, and to ensure the dissemination of results in order to solicit the interest of the general public outside the university setting. That is why our investigation was intended as a public history endeavor, covering three main research products: an oral history archive – we collected almost 50 in-depth interviews about the aftermath of the industrial shutdown in Sesto3; a documentary based

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2 We have worked in partnership with a local foundation, Fondazione ISEC - Istituto per la storia dell’età contemporanea (https://www.fondazioneisec.it/), which also preserves the large archives of the local industrial concerns, the independent association AVoce. Etnografia e storia del lavoro, dell’impresa e del territorio (http://www.avoce.eu/avoce/en/1229-2/), and my department at the University of Milan, the Department of Language Mediation and Intercultural Communication (http://eng.mediazione.unimi.it/ecm/home).
3 The interviews with former workers, union delegates, and managers from Falck Steelworks were realised using the life course model, and were audio and video recorded. The collection is now kept at the ISEC Foundation in Sesto.
on our interviews\textsuperscript{4}; and the photo coverage of the structural change in Sesto, entrusted to Umberto Gillio. In this article, I will try to unearth the cultural meanings and hints implied in these images.

1. Where: Sesto San Giovanni

From the perspective of post-industrial narratives, Sesto San Giovanni is a peculiarly intriguing space for a number of reasons. Undoubtedly, this has to do with the significance of its manufacturing past: for almost the whole 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Sesto has been the location of several big firms with their factories and mills in the steel and heavy industries. To appreciate the magnitude of what has occurred in Sesto in the last decades of the century, we need to keep in mind some crucial events in its history, which can merely be sketched here.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure1_FalckConcordiaplantviewedfromVialeItalia,Falckareassmainlongitudinalaxis,inSestoSanGiovanni(Photo:U.Gillio2015)}
\caption{Figure 1: Falck Concordia plant viewed from Viale Italia, Falck area’s main longitudinal axis, in Sesto San Giovanni (Photo: U. Gillio 2015) }
\end{figure}

Industrialisation in Sesto starts in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century with the arrival of the major businesses of that time. Proximity to Milan, abundant water supply, good railway connections to Central Europe, and cheap property explain why several industrial concerns moved to Sesto in the wave of the Second Industrial Revolution: Breda in 1903 for railway engine manufacturing; Campari in 1904 for industrial beverages; Ercole Marelli in 1905 for power generating engines; Falck in 1906 for steelmaking; and Magneti Marelli in 1919 for magnetos and equipment for the automotive industry (Varini 2006; Tedeschi/Trezzi 2007).

\textsuperscript{4} The documentary, realised with the help of a professional filmmaker, Riccardo Apuzzo, is titled “Il polline e la ruggine” (Pollen and Rust), and is accessible on the ISEC Foundation YouTube channel, in Italian with English subtitles: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcF1GY0DB1Y&vl=en (Accessed 16.04.2020).
Thus, Sesto San Giovanni developed into a genuine industrial hub rather than into a mere company town that caters for a single industry. During the economic boom after WWII, it became the fifth biggest industrial centre in Italy, while Falck grew to be the major private steel company in the country and the major employer in Sesto. In the 1960s, out of 35,000 people who had a job in the city’s heavy industries, 9,000 worked in the four big Falck plants that shone with particularly evocative names: Vittoria (Victoria – for cold rolled steel processing), Vulcano (Volcano – for cast iron processing), Unione (Union, also called T3 – for steel and hot bar rolling), and Concordia (Concord, also called T5 – for plates, welded pipes, and bolts) (James 2006; Trezzi 2007).

As important as it is, the history of Sesto’s big factories barely covers a century. The succession of factory closures was swift: only a 10-year gap separates the bankruptcy of Ercole Marelli in 1984 from the closure of the last Falck steelmaking mill. The demographic shifts in the city reflect this parabolic development: the population numbered less than 7,000 in 1901 and peaked at almost 100,000 at the end of the 1970s; today, the number has shrunk to 80,000 inhabitants. Having gone through what is undeniably a process of deindustrialisation, but one that has not developed into a full post-industrial transformation, Sesto is a far cry from the cool and well-manicured places which western urban marketing has often popularised. Sesto’s deindustrialising process is rather an instance of those “uncertain transitions” which ethnography and other social sciences have increasingly put under scrutiny (Burawoy/Verdery 1999).

Even though at the beginning of the research, our interest was generically directed towards the shutting down of the mills and factories in the city of Sesto San Giovanni during the 1980s and 1990s, our focus progressively narrowed to a single case as the project developed: the Falck steelmaking company. Along with Breda, Falck was the biggest industrial firm in Sesto until the 1980s and the one which usually provides the lion’s share of images in the representations of the city due to its sheer size and the visible traces it has left in the urban landscape. The area formerly occupied by the Falck steel mills, which covers 1,450 square metres, represents 20% of the town’s territory and is at the heart of the largest real estate urban redevelopment project in Italy, which is one of the largest in Europe (Moro 2016).

5 During the post-war economic growth, the Unione plant became the biggest privately owned steel mill in Italy; its claw-shaped roof, rebuilt in the 1950s, is a landmark in Sesto. Today, the only accessible site is Concordia, visible from the east side of Viale Italia, the main street cutting through the Falck area, together with the Magazzini Generali (MA.GE), the warehouse where the bolt section was located.