

## A case of industrial heritage: the Ceramica Ligure Vaccari

Alice Cutullè

**Abstract:** An extraordinary case of industrial heritage, the Ceramica Ligure Vaccari in Santo Stefano di Magra (Italy), one of the most important Italian factory of glazed ceramic exported in all over the world. This factory was abandoned after 2006 and then the municipality decided to not forget its history and trying to create a new cultural life and a new engine of development of the site. For this reason, born the project NOVA, a cultural hub where the artists and the community have occupied the old warehouses and have given new life to the factory.

**Key words:** industrial heritage, ceramic, factory, NOVA, warehouses, company town, Vaccari.

### Un caso de arqueología industrial: Ceramica Ligure Vaccari

**Resumen:** Un caso extraordinario de patrimonio industrial, la Ceramica Ligure Vaccari en Santo Stefano di Magra (Italia), una de las más importantes fábricas italianas de cerámica esmaltada exportada en todo el mundo. Esta fábrica fue abandonada después de 2006 y luego el municipio decidió no olvidar su historia y tratando de crear una nueva vida cultural y un nuevo motor de desarrollo del sitio. Por esta razón nació el proyecto NOVA, un polo cultural donde los artistas y la comunidad han ocupado los antiguos almacenes y han dado nueva vida a la fábrica.

**Palabras clave:** patrimonio industrial, cerámica, fábrica, NOVA, almacenes, pueblo de los trabajadores, Vaccari.

### Introduction

What is the industrial archeology? To answer to this question it would be enough to consult an encyclopedia to the corresponding item: "the study of the history of technology based on the discovery, examination, and sometimes preservation, of the buildings, machinery, etc. of earlier industrial activity (Webster's New World College Dictionary, 2010 by Wiley Publishing, Inc., Cleveland, Ohio.).

This definition, however, despite its clarity, is not exhaustive. First, there are no indications related to its history. This topic in fact was born in England, it is

no coincidence that is the birthplace of the industrial revolution, thanks to a group of scholars-enthusiasts, most notably Kenneth Hudson, who began studying and cataloging this heritage. Today the industrial archeology is not only what is specified above, it is having, from the last decades, a real transformation. This transformation is the result of the need for people to regain possession of these abandoned and disused spaces and bring them back to a new life.

Often there are questions about what is the best way to exploit these areas, according to some should simply be transformed into shopping centers to produce again wealth. There are those who believe that the best way

is to turn them into creative and cultural spaces. The first cases of reuse of spaces have appeared in Germany, as in the case of the mining establishment of the Ruhr, and then developed throughout Europe, even up in Finland (Cable Factory Kaapeli). These factories have been converted for cultural purposes, proper cultural hub, where the community meets for cultural events, co-working etc.

But look at the Italian case. This is marked by a very early origin, as early as the late eighteenth century, with the case of San Leucio, and then from the end of the nineteenth century with Crespi d'Adda, Schio, etc.

But what do we mean exactly? These factories have had importance not only locally, creating jobs and growth within the communities in which they had settled, but which, thanks to their production, have become international.

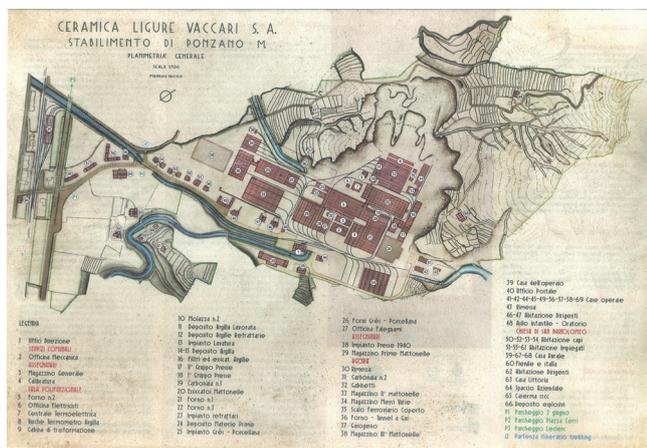
Unfortunately, as often happens, some factories give way to more modern and therefore close and tend to be forgotten.

In Italy, there are many cases and only now we are trying to recover these buildings.

The common denominator of these experiences is the cultural conversion.

It's starting to understand that it is more useful to enhance and redevelop rather than building new buildings.

Some cases of conversion for culture can be seen in Rome (Ex Mattatoio, Ex Caserma Guido Reni, Centrale Montemartini etc.), Milan (Ex Ansaldo, MuDEC, Fondazione Prada, Hangar Bicocca, BASE) Bologna, Ferrara (Grisù Space), Borca di Cadore (Dolomiti Contemporanee) and not least the case I studied, the Ceramica Ligure Vaccari of Santo Stefano di Magra (La Spezia, Italy) [Figure 1].



**Figure 1.-** The factory now.



**Figure 2.-** A kind of production of futurist's mosaic in Genoa (Fillia, The swimmer).

My research deals with this important glazed ceramic factory established at the end of Nineteenth century and I studied, during my master thesis, the history of the production from the beginning to the closure in 2006.

In fact, this factory was very famous in the mid-twentieth century, so much to export its tiles worldwide.

The typical production was a specific kind of tile, the 2X2 cm, which was used both for the ceramic coatings that for artistic mosaics, as the futuristic mosaics in the Thirties, for example "The swimmer" of Fillia, in the pool of Albaro (Genoa, Italy) [Figure 2].

The basis of my work was the archive, a very important source of data and information related to the history of the factory, the people who worked there and machinery used.

But the most importance source was the oral evidence, thanks to the Vaccari family.

In fact, the founder of the factory, was Carlo Vaccari, who decided to change the old brick production in a ceramic production. He was an "illuminated" industrial man, he had indeed the intuition of not wasting the clay of quarry, and he understood the importance of giving a home to those workers who came from other regions.

For this reason, he created a company town.

The importance of this company town is closely linked to the others Italians company towns, which I mentioned before, like Schio and Crespi d'Adda. In fact, there is a Master House, in the case of Santo Stefano di Magra it is called Villa Vaccari, in which the owner of the factory lives and supervises the plant, and following the houses of workers, duplex houses divided into two floor. Then the others buildings for the common life of the workers, for relax and shop.

Carlo Vaccari assigned to engineer Mazzocchini to designed some of the buildings of the company town, as the House of workers, where there was the dining hall, the shower for the employees and the bicycle storage, and the Company Store.

Not least, to complete the company town, was built the church, called St. Carlo Borromeo, in memory of the founder.

After the ownership of Carlo Vaccari, the family Vaccari inherited the factory.

Following the shutdown due to the Second World War, the production was among the most popular in the world, it was required for ships, hospitals, houses ect., thanks to the economic boom of the postwar period.

Unfortunately, the Seventies proclaimed the production crisis, because other factories were producing the same product at a lower cost, and this deep crisis will lead to failure in 1972.

Despite several changes of ownership, the factory officially closes in 2006.

After the final closure the City Council has decided to maintain, at his own expense, the material derived from the factory and contained within it, which otherwise would have been quickly dispersed. The material in this warehouse is incredibly heterogeneous: tracing paper, seals, floor plans etc., but also artistic mosaics and old machinery.

In this context born NOVA, Nuovo Opificio Vaccari delle Arti, a project that aims to win a challenge: the creation of a cultural economy pole and urban reprogramming of the entire area.

The City took a portion of the area in free loan for eight years, and some buildings, following a public announcement, have been assigned to private cultural operators.



**Figure 3.-** The mosaic of the former stable calibration



**Figure 4.-** STUDIO ARCHEPTA, Project of the former stable calibration.

This is an innovative form of both public and private partnership, in fact the old warehouses have been restored and now there is a contemporary art gallery (Galleria Cardelli & Fontana), a design shop where the products are made by the reuse of industrial waste (La Stanza delle necessità), a school for sound engineers and entertainment technologies (Full Service), a music center (Industrie Musicali Acim), and a skatepark (SportXFun).

Furthermore, collaterally to these activities, thanks to a regional funding, the municipality has bought the former stable calibration, one of the oldest and most valuable warehouse of the factory, in fact it preserves ceramic mosaics in the facade [figure 3]. Here it takes place the Vaccari Archive, which preserves what has left of all the documentation of the various offices, along with old machinery. [figure 4]

In other spaces in free loan, in the Palace of Leadership, there was also new public functions: the library of the City, the urban center, and now the Municipality is creating a guesthouse, a kind of creative residence, in which artists, designers ecc. can use as a studio and living quarters, in line with the idea of making again a living area.

The cultural hub, NOVA indeed, holds up an archive and a space for exhibitions, but also some cultural activities in general.

## Conclusions

After a deep analysis and study of the Ceramica Ligure Vaccari, I realized that the only use of this importance and extensive area is the re-use, strictly linked to the cultural purposes.

In fact, nowadays, the cultural hub is the answer: an abandoned factory becomes a new centre of culture.

The factory becomes a meeting point, place of exchange and growth, for the community, as in the past.

The future of NOVA depends on the citizens, on the municipality and on anyone who believes that drawing the attention to the plant is an innovative way to protect and endorse such an important resource.

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