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## CRESPI D'ADDA

*“There starts the future. No one really knows how it will be. Some people say it will be better, others are sceptical and don't take a position. ‘There will be jobs for everybody, all year long’ one says prophetically while pouring a drink.”*

*Al di qua del fiume, Alessandra Selmi*

The workers' village of Crespi d'Adda, situated in the municipality of Capriate San Gervasio (province of Bergamo), is one of the best examples of industrial archaeology in Europe. Created at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of an entrepreneurial vision and dream, it represents the attempt to set up an “ideal working village”. Its innovative design can still be admired today: the cotton mill with its huge chimneys, the castle, the church, the workers' and managers' houses, the doctor's and the local priest's houses, the school and the graveyard. The factory came first, in 1878, in an area in the province of Bergamo used as a forest and pasture, rich in water resources and where the workforce was still rural.

Here, entrepreneur Cristoforo Benigno Crespi set up his cotton mill. The machinery was operated by the wild waters of the Adda river and its goods were transported to Milan along the Naviglio della Martesana. The factory was in step with the times: it consisted of two departments – spinning and twisting – and, at the peak of its productivity, it had 1,200 mechanical looms, employed up to 4,000 workers and produced 50,000 m of fabric per day. The decisive step for setting up an ideal company town was the creation of the workers' village, that did not only include the workers' houses, as over time different facilities were added, such as the school, the consumer cooperative, the hospital, the church and the graveyard. The industry's profound transformations since the 1930's gradually undermined this utopian community, until all was eventually shut down in 2003.



## CULTURAL HERITAGE

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**CRITERIA FOR SELECTION:** Crespi d'Adda is an outstanding example of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon of the “company town” found in Europe and North America, which was an expression of the prevailing philosophy of enlightened industrialists towards their employees.



*“For no reason the workers must be left to fend for themselves, with time on their hand, least of all at the same time and all together.”*

That's what Ulderico Bernardi says in his *Ricerca sociologica sul villaggio operaio di Crespi d'Adda* published in *Villaggi operai in Italia. La Val Padana e Crespi d'Adda*. With its orthogonal layout, Crespi d'Adda is a model of urban planning rationality. The town is bisected by Corso Manzoni, the main road, which clearly separates the residential area from the working one.

The **1** textile factory, which can be recognised by its towering chimney, is inspired by the most state-of-the-art British factories, with skylight roofs letting the sunlight penetrate into the large premises of the cast-iron facility. The main entrance is adorned by red wrought-iron gates, a liberty artwork by Alessandro Mazzucotelli which is not the only decorative element of the complex, where terracotta friezes of Medieval inspiration can also be seen. The idea at the basis of the entire village was the need to match functionality with elegance, that's why the founder and his heirs assigned the design to great architects and engineers, such as Angelo Colla, Ernesto Pirovano, Gaetano Moretti and Pietro Brunati. The **2** workers' village is a collection of housing theories:

from the multi-family residences at the village entrance (3-storey buildings for 12 families) to the one-family and two-family houses, definitely more spacious and healthier, in line with the entrepreneurs' forward-thinking approach, in particular Silvio Benigno Crespi's, the founder's son. Some have one front door with stairs leading to the top floor, others have two separate entrance doors; the kitchen and the living room are on the ground floor, the bedrooms are on the first floor. Right after the second world war, several detached houses were built for the office-workers and the foremen, and those for the managers were even more sumptuous, surrounded by nature. Some impressive buildings stand out in this geometrical regular grid. One is the **school** (one floor was

for the classrooms, the other for the teachers) including a theatre and then also a movie-theatre. Students could attend for free until the third year of primary school. The other is **3** Villa Crespi, a triumph of eclecticism mixing materials and ornaments typical of the Padana Valley Middle Ages, ranging from bricks to battlements. The **4** church is a smaller copy of Santa Maria di Piazza Sanctuary in Busto Arsizio, the founder's home town. In the church the mass was celebrated every morning at 6.30 before work. And finally, there is the **5** cemetery outside the village, where the **mausoleum** of the Crespi family stands out for its collection of styles from the past and very fascinating complexity.



## THE WORKERS' HOUSE

*“For quite a while the system of building large multi-storey residences had been followed by everyone, in order to accommodate from ten up to twenty families: that was a mistake. These are barracks, not houses, where the crying of children, the gossiping of women, and any kind of noise break the silence needed to rest. Here people live together, the excessive proximity of the families generates discontent, ending up in arguments and fights. Industrialists should not delude themselves that with such a building method their workforce would be loyal, as the workers will always be wandering, in search for a better pay. The ideal worker's house must be for just one family and surrounded by a small garden, separated from the other people living there.”*

from a report by Silvio Benigno Crespi, 1894

In the workers' village, made up of several brick buildings laid out in a geometrically regular form (like a checkboard), every house included a garden and the employees-inhabitants' needs were met by a specific protection system: a case of enlightened entrepreneurship for that time, a warning and an antidote to today's managers' unrestrained competitiveness.



'NO GREEK VASES, PREHISTORIC SKELETONS OR ROMAN JEWELS: INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY IS THAT DISCIPLINE WHICH STUDIES BUILDINGS, MACHINES AND TECHNOLOGIES OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AGE, DEVELOPED BETWEEN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> AND 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES. THIS AREA NEAR BERGAMO IS PARTICULARLY FULL OF EXAMPLES.'

The **1 workers' village of Crespi d'Adda** was a self-sufficient microcosm. The birth of this "ideal town" dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century thanks to entrepreneur Cristoforo Benigno Crespi, who did not only want a productive and state-of-the-art cotton mill, but also to guarantee the best living conditions for his employees. That's why, in front of the factory, this **village** was built, with two-storey houses all alike. The workers did not have to cover long distances to reach the workplace and so could perform their tasks with greater energy. All the facilities essential for the community life were added little by little. A **church** and a **villa**, looking like a medieval

castle where the Crespi family used to stay for short periods, were also built. Then the **school**: the classrooms were on the ground floor, while the teachers' apartments were on the first floor. Children attended until the third year of primary school, after which they then had to move to Bergamo. However, it was still the company that would cover all expenses. If you are wondering how such a large factory could function, visit the **hydroelectric power station**, where you will find a huge turbine operating the machines. A few kilometres away, there is another wonder of industrial archaeology:

**2 Taccani hydroelectric power plant.** Cristoforo Benigno Crespi played again a crucial role: for him architect Gaetano Moretti created a fairy-tale facility which mingles with the medieval ruins of Trezzo sull'Adda castle situated by the river.

Now follow the Adda river northbound, towards Imbersago, where you can experience a wonderful adventure on **3 Leonardo's Ferry.** Although it was not invented by him, this boat was certainly studied by Leonardo da Vinci during his long stay in this area. To operate the boat connecting Imbersago with Villa d'Adda, no human power or fuel are needed, but the river current, a cable and some knowledge of physics – a very eco-friendly means of transport!



## CRESPI D'ADDA in books

*Reading suggestions to find out more about this industrial archaeology site.*

• **Villaggi operai in Italia. La Val Padana e Crespi d'Adda** (1981). One of the most exhaustive scientific books on this topic, dedicated to the birth of workers' villages in Europe and in our country in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with an engaging sociological analysis of Crespi's village.

• **Silvio Benigno Crespi. L'uomo, il politico, l'imprenditore**, by Cristian Bonomi, Giorgio Ravasio, Luigi Cortesi (2018). This anthology describes the interesting personality of Silvio Benigno Crespi, the founder's

firstborn, enlightened entrepreneur and then senator and chairman of the Commercial Bank.

• **Al di qua del fiume**, Alessandra Selmi (2022). Finally, a historical and choral novel about the utopian community founded by Cristoforo and then continued by Silvio Crespi who, together with Olivetti, promoted beauty also in a manufacturing context. Emilia and the other characters, entrepreneurs and workers, are well depicted, united in this microworld by a shared vision of dignity and progress, also in the most critical moments of the cotton mill history.

• **Crespi d'Adda**, Giorgio Ravasio (2023). The subtitle "The city of fruitful work, social utopia and architectural

metaphor" clarifies the goal of this book: a journey in that "religion of work" still relevant today and the chronicle of the rise of a dream and the fall of an ambition. The author is one of the greatest experts in this subject.

### Children's books:

• **La fabbrica delle storie**, Gisella Laterza (2024). Here the village is seen through the eyes of a little girl living in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The factory hard work and the precarious social conditions affect also children's lives, but they are transformed by the protagonist's imagination into enchanting characters and situations. The storytelling becomes an anchor for the children, to shape magic and adapt a bigger reality to their needs.