

The background of the cover is composed of large, expressive, overlapping brushstrokes in various shades of teal and blue. A dark, textured square is positioned in the center-right area, overlapping the brushstrokes.

COMUNICAR LA ARQUITECTURA

DEL ORIGEN DE LA MODERNIDAD A LA ERA DIGITAL

eug

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TOMO I

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del origen de la modernidad
a la era digital

TOMO I

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(EDS.)

COMUNICAR LA ARQUITECTURA

del origen de la modernidad a la era digital

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Diaphanous White. The Industrial Garden City of Rosignano Solvay Through the Colors and Photographs by Massimo Vitali

Blanco diáfano. La ciudad jardín industrial de Rosignano Solvay a través de los colores y las fotografías de Massimo Vitali

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Abstract

El blanco es el único color de Rosignano Solvay: blanca se vuelve el agua, la tierra y, de repente, el cielo entre los humos de las chimeneas del horizonte. Los colores del paisaje captados por el fotógrafo Massimo Vitali para la revista *Vogue Italia*, describen la historia del territorio, vinculado a la industria de la sosa cáustica, fundada por Ernest Solvay a principios del siglo pasado. Mirando más allá de la colosal máquina industrial, se vislumbra todo el sistema urbano, organizado según los principios utópicos de las “ciudades jardín” construidas aquí siguiendo tipologías arquitectónicas precisas. En contraposición al típico modelo industrial, alienante, brutal, la ciudad se alineó con aquellos principios innovadores promovidos por Ebenezer Howard, quien buscaba las ventajas de la vida urbana junto con los placeres del campo, imaginando un sistema de Company Towns que introdujera la idea de la baja densidad y el verdor generalizado, garantizando un contexto de bienestar para toda la comunidad.

White is the only color of Rosignano Solvay: white becomes the water, the earth, and suddenly the sky among the fumes of the chimneys on the horizon. The colors of the landscape captured by the photographer Massimo Vitali, for *Vogue Italia* Magazine, describe the story of the territory, linked to the caustic soda industry, founded by Ernest Solvay at the beginning of the last century. Looking beyond the colossal industrial machine, one can catch a glimpse of the entire urban system, organized according to the utopian principles of the “garden cities” built here following precise architectural typologies. In contraposition with the typical industrial model, alienating, brutal, the city aligned with those innovative principles promoted by Ebenezer Howard, who sought the advantages of urban life together with the pleasures of the countryside, envisioning a system of Company Towns that would introduce the idea of low density and widespread greenery, guaranteeing a context of well-being for the whole community.

Keywords

Ciudad industrial, ciudad jardín, revista *Vogue*, Ernst Solvay, Massimo Vitali

Industrial City, Garden City, *Vogue* magazine, Ernst Solvay, Massimo Vitali

If it is true that colors have the ability to narrate the tale of a place and its landscape, then when contemplating the color white, it is inevitable not to conjure the image of the diaphanous sea along the Tuscan shoreline, descending southward beneath the city of Livorno.

In Rosignano everything is white, white becomes the water, white becomes the color of the beach and its land, and suddenly even the sky marked by the fumes of the smokestacks that stand out on the horizon of its waterfront becomes white.

Diaphanous is thus the landscape, captured by the shots of photographer Massimo Vitali, during a shoot for the September 2021 issue of *Vogue Italia* magazine (fig. 1).



Figure 1. “D0088 Rosignano Milk buzza”, 2020, Massimo Vitali, Rosignano spiaggia bianca. Source: Massimo Vitali Archive.

In the details, meticulously captured by one of the most famous photographers on the international scene, we re-find the history of that territory so strongly marked and indelibly linked to the caustic soda industry founded by Belgian entrepreneur Ernest Solvay at the beginning of the last century. The region of Tuscany, much like many parts of Italy, identified agriculture as its primary productive sector. Notably scarce were the instances of significant industrial activities. However, some exceptions stood out, such as the Orlando Shipyard situated in Livorno. Additionally, a few cotton mills were established in the Pisa

and Lucca regions, the Doccia ceramics factory, the Pignone foundry, Saint Gobain in Pisa, the Prato woolen mill, and several other dispersed businesses.

At the beginning of the 20th century, with the inauguration of the Livorno-Vada segment of the railway line, the first large industries were seen springing up in the Tuscan territory. Notably, the Belgian industrial complex known as “Solvay” made its debut on the national stage during this time.

This settlement was a product of the liberal policy framework initiated at the beginning of the century, where the prevailing elite authorized and encouraged the growth of medium and large-scale industries. This was especially prominent in regions that had previously relied on agriculture as their economic foundation. These areas, considered unproductive in this context, were identified as low-cost state-owned territories.

Clearly, the inability to obtain authorization for the establishment of the Solvay Company in nearby municipalities, combined with the acquisition of the economically favorable state-owned land, the availability of quarries for raw material extraction required in production, and the strategic natural harbor of Vada, collectively led to the establishment of the Solvay plant in the Rosignano vicinity. Initially termed Rosignano Nuovo through municipal decree, the name was subsequently changed to Rosignano Solvay on August 20th, 1917, in response to pressure exerted by the Solvay Company.

The Solvay Company, established in Belgium in 1863, constructed a facility in Rosignano for the purpose of producing soda ash, utilizing the method devised and perfected by its founders, the Solvay brothers. Particularly, Belgian industrialist and philanthropist Ernest Solvay (1838-1922) pioneered the creation of soda ash through the ammonia process, fundamentally shifting its production from artisanal to industrial. By 1913, the Solvay factory was established at a single production site, generating two primary products: caustic soda, or sodium hydroxide, and soda ash proper, or sodium carbonate.

This factory was strategically situated in close proximity to the Ponteginori salt pans, a major hub for rock salt production in Tuscany, as well as the San Carlo limestone mines. Adequate connections were established with these locations. This advantageous location, due to its nearness to raw material sources and the economic and trade networks of the production center, elevated it to a position of influence on the European scale. This transformation turned the small village of farmers into a real city that orbited the industrial world, whose importance can still be seen today in the toponymy of its places that recall the Solvay world.

Looking beyond the gigantic industrial machine, captured in Massimo Vitali's pictures, you can see the system of the entire urban settlement, desired and expressly organized and directed by Ernest Solvay (fig. 2).

He wanted to create urbanization next to his factory that, following precise architectural typologies, would make the social hierarchy that defines the entire community orbiting around the factory immediately recognizable.

Massimo Vitali's gaze, captured nearly 20 years later in a photograph that seeks to recount the same glimpse of industrial life depicted in an earlier shot, continues to illuminate the hierarchical matrix and the urban framework that characterized the urban environment.

This evokes some memories of the search for urban utopias, often linked to the industrial city’s challenging economic and social circumstances. Particularly to the concept of the so-called “progressive pre-urbanism”, an integral aspect of the emerging wave of utopian socialism at the time¹.



Figure 2. “#0081 Rosignano sea 3”, 1998, Massimo Vitali, Rosignano spiaggia bianca. Source: Massimo Vitali Archive.

The reformatory effort aimed at housing solutions capable of overcoming the challenges posed by industrial cities originated directly from utopian socialism. This ideology embraced industrial civilization while advocating for its regulation in accordance with the principles of social justice and equity. However, this phase was brief and unsuccessful, quickly being overtaken by the Fourierist concept of the phalansterio². This model was recovered by en-

¹ G. Franco Elia, *Il Villaggio e la fabbrica. Insediamenti industriali in Gran Bretagna e in Italia: aspetti della struttura sociale* (Bologna: Compositori, 1999), 9.

² Unlike Saint Simon, Fourier is critical of the civil society of his time and condemns the inconsistencies of nascent industrialization. A ruralist and anti-industrialist, he dreams of a revival of agricultural production and proposes the organization of society into grassroots communities that he calls “phalanxes,” housed in collective structures, gathered in a unitary building complex, the “phalansterio,” which was supposed, according to his idea, to constitute the basic cell of the new social order. In fact, the phalansterio was to house a community, the phalanx, consisting of 1620 people, housed in a system of buildings around a large plaza, with a series of shared facilities: the kitchens, library, theater, and dormitory. For more details see: Carlo Capra, Giorgio Chittolini and Franco Della Peruta, *Corso di storia Vol. III – l’Ottocento e il Novecento* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1992), 49.

trepreneurs and used within the context of industrial paternalism, a strain of entrepreneurial ideology that believed in achieving optimal productivity by ensuring better living conditions for its workers. Consequently, the prevalent residential settlement typology became that of the detached single house complete with gardens and vegetable plots. This format served as an instrument for educating the working class about individualism and family withdrawal. Social hierarchies thus were maintained, accentuated, and superimposed on those of the factory work organization. This emphasis on social distinction was extended to the layout of the village itself. These settlements were designed to facilitate the spatial segregation of different social classes, corresponding to their respective roles within the industrial framework. This separation was manifested in distinct neighborhoods and varying housing typologies, aligning with the specific job functions carried out within the industrial setting.

In Vitali's photography, while white may initially captivate the viewer's attention, it is immediately juxtaposed by the presence of green, creating a contrasting backdrop that accentuates the white elements (fig. 3).



Figure 3. “#0140 Rosignano three women”, 1995, Massimo Vitali, Rosignano Solvay. Source: Massimo Vitali Archive.

It was indeed green that became the second determining color of the urbanistic setting, in which the idea of man's connection to the earth was fundamental for maintaining the conditions for an autonomous and serene life within industrial society. This interplay between the fading world of the recent past, rooted in the agrarian traditions of the peasantry, and the emerging industrial society, emphasized the potential of preserving fragments of the past during the process of re-education. This approach aimed to facilitate a smoother transition, thereby mitigating the potential trauma associated with this societal shift³.

These ideas converged in Ebenezer Howard's theory of the Garden City, which identified in greenery the fulfillment of the need for decorum, thus not only a vegetable garden capable of ensuring self-sufficiency and a link with the land but also a flower garden capable of ensuring a well-defined urban image, an ameliorative evolution of the initial idea of cultivated land.

According to Howard, there exists a third path between urban and rural living, where the benefits of city life, such as dynamism and modernity, can harmoniously coexist with the virtues of the countryside, namely serenity and natural surroundings. This concept is embodied in what Howard refers to as the Garden City. Private greenery, in its care, was thus meant to stimulate a sense of individual and collective decorum, while at the same time enabling social control over industrial workers, who thus occupied, did not spend their time in taverns, inevitably warding off dangers of a political nature.

The construction of this residential complex, outside the urban area, was thus an attempt to respond to one of the many economic and social challenges posed by the industrial revolution and became one of the cornerstones of the industrial strategy, with an international scope, that the Solvay group implanted in the Labronian territory, imposing centralized planning with a well-defined Nordic style, determined by the design choices of Belgian architect Jules Brunfaut⁴.

³ Already Le Play proposed preserving some traces of the past as a transitional and reeducational phase to make the transition from the countryside to the city less traumatic. From Le Play's theories grew the works on garden cities, including those of Ebenezer Howard. The latter identified greenery as fulfilling the need for image and decorum. This second configuration should not be regarded as an evolution of the first; it is not an alternative, but a natural succession and refinement.

⁴ Brunfaut is now considered one of the highest expressions of Belgian architecture at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. He worked for a long time in the service of Solvay, for which he not only worked on industrial villages, but was also the author of ambitious projects, such as pavilions for the group's participation in universal expositions and those for the sumptuous private residences of members of the Solvay family. Brunfaut, who was born in Brussels in 1852, attended secondary studies at the Royal Athenaeum in Brussels, then courses at the civil engineering school of the University of Ghent, then attended the Academy of Fine Arts, also in Brussels, and later the National School of Fine Arts in Paris, where he deepened his knowledge of classical architecture, knowledge that he refined on a long trip to Italy, which lasted almost two years, from 1881 to 1882. He reached full professional maturity during the period when the Art Nouveau movements were taking hold, but his cultural education, deeply conditioned by his classical culture, kept him quite far from the suggestions of the new cultural avant-garde. He remained basically tied to the architecture of tradition, which moreover guaranteed him the favor of a part of the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie, of which the Solvays were, in Belgium, the highest expression. For more details consult: Dominique Bonnett, "Jules Brunfaut 1852-1942" (Thesis at the I.S.A.E, Brussels, 1985).

Fair-faced bricks for the elevations, *marsigliese* roofing for the very sloping roofs, and very high chimneys became the characteristic elements of the 199 buildings intended for private housing, containing 655 dwellings, including 33 for engineers and managers, 90 for executives, 104 for clerks and foremen, and 396 for blue-collar workers, for a total of 22 types of housing (fig. 4).

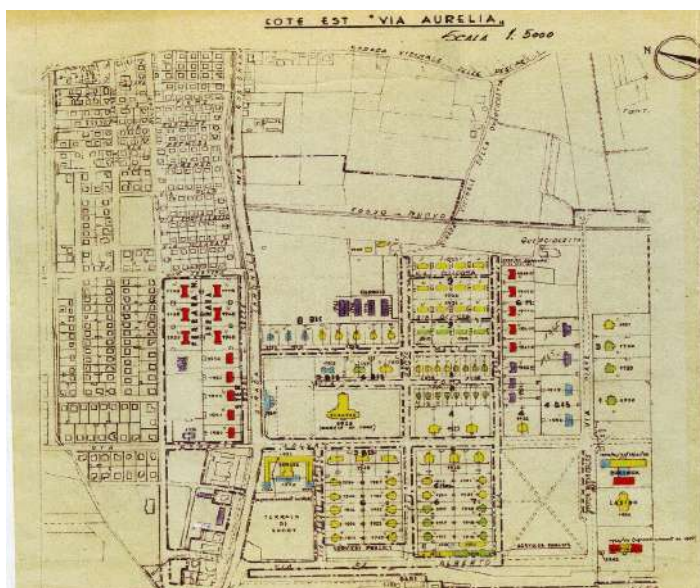


Figure 4. Floor plans. Source: *Inventaire Technique de l'Usine de Rosignano Vol II – Installations Communes*.

While the construction of the village did not occur simultaneously, the architectural styles corresponding to a well-defined corporate hierarchy remained consistent throughout the various phases of development.

The houses for blue-collar workers, identified in the Solvay classification as type 9 and 9M, have four apartments per building, the average area of which measures 77.41 sq. m., have no attic or cellar, and the average area devoted to a vegetable garden/garden is 341.36 sq. m.

On the other hand, houses for white-collar and blue-collar workers have two different type groups, one pre-war, with type 8A and 8Bis houses, consisting of two apartments each, and one post-war, with type 9bis, 9bisM and 9ter, consisting of four apartments. This is a development of type 9, intended for workers, with greater living and land area: 84.57 square meters of apartment, 28.23 square meters of attic, and 15.65 square meters of cellar. The average land area for exclusive use is 440.19 square meters.

There are also three groups of types, one pre-war, involving two-apartment houses, belonging to types 6, 6mod and 7, and two post-war, 5ter and 6M characterized by two apartments per house, while Ferrara and Ferrara M. characterized by four-apartment houses, for

an average of about 131.71 sq. m. of apartment, 30.47 sq. m. of attic, 32.93 sq. m. of cellar and 851.31 sq. m. of exclusive land.

Instead, single-family villas named type 3, 4, 4bis, 5, 5bis, and finally the 6bis, of about 160.05 square meters with attics of about 65.74 square meters and cellars 61.60 square meters, including a plot of land of about 1,899.21 square meters, were planned for the executives (fig. 5).



Figure 5. Aerial view of the industrial plant and village at the end of the 1970s. Source: Photographic archive of Solvay company.

Thus, the industrial history of Italy is encapsulated in the colors of a photograph, capable of narrating tales of utopian aspirations, architectures, ways of envisioning habitation, and organizing the urban framework around a nucleus that evolved into a fundamental center of production during a distinct historical moment.

Once more, the photographs that have become iconic return, and again the images taken from the sea, capable of recounting that industrial dream that changed the fate of a small Tuscan village, transforming it into a manufacturing hub of great renown, but at the same time drastically changed its landscape.⁵

As we already noticed, white is the predominant color in the, nearly too aesthetic, pictures of Massimo Vitali. If you look closely, at the large-format photographs, you can sense that a key to understanding the images is the stratigraphy of the colors in the picture itself. You

⁵ The text up to this point was written by Chiara Simoncini.

can notice that beneath the white and the green, the sky should be blue and the sea that he looks upon, too, should mirror this color with different intensity (fig. 6).



Figure 6. “#0079 Rosignano sea 2”, 1998, Massimo Vitali, Rosignano spiaggia bianca. Source: Massimo Vitali Archive.

This can be easily read as an allegory of the industrial society and its urbanistic in the context of the garden city of Rosignano Solvay.

The smoke of the giant chimneys covers everything, it covers the sky, it covers the green of nature, it covers the way you naturally see things. The chimney, the smoke, and the color white are the symbols of the industrial paternalism that we previously mentioned.

This phenomenon explains how in some cases, business owners or managers take on a role of *paternal* responsibility towards their employees, attempting to provide for their workers' needs beyond the work pay.

The social structure of industrial villages, like this case study, is influenced by the desire to respond to the needs of a population almost entirely occupied in industry, characterized by similar aspirations, ways of life, and thinking, to foster processes of solidarity and aggregation among the inhabitants. At the same time, the typology and the location of the housing

reflects the hierarchical and operating structure of the company and produces a high level of social stratification, whereby the hierarchical relationships of the company are reflected in the social ones. The village is also designed to strengthen traditional cultural models that have their friends in work, family, morals, and religion. All of this requires strong leadership that is exercised by the owner of the industry⁶ who, in the context of industrial paternalism, is able to truly supervise space organization, maintenance, decorum, and all aspects of social life. This tends to eliminate behaviors deemed to be conflictual and deviant and to maintain a strong sense of subordination towards residents, focusing on giving a better life to the workers with the aim of maximizing production.

The village was purposely born as a closed structure and therefore as impermeable as possible to unions and aggregations. As Frederic Engels points out "the possession of the house, the garden, and the field, the security of the dwelling become today, in the era of the domination of the big industry, is not only the most serious constraint of the workers but also the worst misfortune for the whole working class"⁷.

The single home becomes a tool to educate workers on individualism and family enclosure. Social hierarchies are not only maintained but accentuated and superimposed by the organization of work in the factory. The divisions are also underlined by the layout of the village itself, which emphasizes the spatial separation of classes into distinct districts and sectors. The orthogonal urban layout itself should give a sense of order and cleanliness. In the phase of proto industrialism⁸, industrial intervention is limited to the construction of elementary infrastructures, such as schools and welfare institutions, which are indispensable for binding the worker to the factory. In the phase of paternalism proper, the social city was realized, creating an autonomous complex; a relatively self-sufficient housing complex with its own service facilities, characterized by a position that isolated it from the rest of the territory and made it functional to the factory system.

On an ideological level, the social city therefore tends towards isolation, the cultural monopoly of the owner of the industry, and the imposition of his charismatic figure. The ambition to recreate the conditions of the medieval *curtense* economy can be configured in this experience, and the master's residence, built within the village, is often reminiscent of a castle in terms of location and architectural style.

Changing point of view, if we dwell on the perception of its population, we can see how they live their isolation and their autonomy with pride. There is some kind of patriotism and esteem to be part of something, something that in their eyes appears great.

⁶ There are some case studies, such as, in Terni and Piombino, where the management of the city seemed to pass into the hands of the industry. A. Ciuffetti, *Casa e lavoro* (Perugina: Crace, 2004), 55.

⁷ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, trans. Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2009).

⁸ Proto-industrialism, also known as pre-industrial or pre-factory production, refers to a stage of economic development that occurred before the full-fledged Industrial Revolution. It emerged during the 17th and 18th centuries in certain regions of Europe, particularly in rural areas. Proto-industrialism was characterized by the coexistence of agrarian and industrial activities.

“There was a bit of that typical climate, of the bond on the part of someone, the so-called *solvaynism*, I think it is a sense that is normal when a society becomes the main interpreter and builds a city around itself⁹”

This patriotism became so great in the '50, that people from the nearby cities envied the life that the population of Rosignano was able to conduct.

Many years ago, I visited Rosignano and I was struck by this environment. Me, as a city boy from Livorno. The thought of coming to a place where you park the car in front of your house, and on the summer evenings you can have dinner in the garden with lettuce collected from your garden and apricots taken from the tree. It fascinated me very much so I decided that I had to live here, even if I worked in Livorno. For 30 years I commuted and I've never regretted it.¹⁰

At the same time, we can see how the population realizes the pressure and subtle enclosure superimposed by the urbanism organization itself:

Normally, every country, every city has a square, where there are bars with small tables, benches where the elderly gather, playgrounds for children, where public events take place; the square, here, doesn't exist. It has never existed. I believe it's because Solvay didn't want it. Solvay's concept was, “I've provided you with a house with a garden, with a vegetable patch, you have all your comforts... stay at home. You don't have to go to the square, because the square holds all sorts of contaminations”. I've noticed that this absence is also present in other industrial cities. So, it's a hidden disposition.¹¹

After these considerations, is important though to point out that, while industrial paternalism might be viewed as a potential concern, it is crucial to consider it within its historical context. The architecture of an era often mirrors the society of that time; the garden city of Rosignano Solvay is a highly successful architectural experiment in this regard, which even now maintains a functional urban fabric that reflects the era of industrialization. This

⁹ Gabriele Veronesi and Federico La Piccirella, *Rosignano Solvay - La Fabbrica che si fece Giardino* (documentary film) (2017). Carlo Ciuti, ex Solvay worker points out: “C'era un po' di quel tipico clima, legato alla parte di qualcuno, il cosiddetto solvaynismo, penso che sia un sentimento normale quando una società diventa l'interprete principale e costruisce una città attorno a sé.”

¹⁰ Veronesi, La Piccirella, *Rosignano Solvay*.... Mauro Cusmani, the inhabitant of Rosignano Solvay points: “Molti anni fa, ho visitato Rosignano e sono rimasto colpito da questo ambiente. Io, che vengo dalla città di Livorno. Il pensiero di venire in un luogo dove parcheggi l'auto di fronte a casa tua, e nelle sere d'estate puoi cenare in giardino con lattuga raccolta dal tuo orto e albicocche prese dall'albero. Mi ha affascinato molto, così ho deciso che dovevo viverci, anche se lavoravo a Livorno. Per 30 anni ho fatto il pendolare e non me ne sono mai pentito.”

¹¹ Veronesi, La Piccirella, *Rosignano Solvay*.... Mauro Cusmani, the inhabitant of Rosignano Solvay points: “normalmente ogni paese, ogni città ha la piazza, dove ci sono i bar con i tavolini, le panchine dove gli anziani si trovano, i giochi per i bambini, dove si fanno le manifestazioni pubbliche, la piazza qui, non c'è. Non c'è mai stata. Io credo perché la Solvay non la voleva. Il concetto di Solvay era, “io ti ho fatto la casa con il giardino, con l'orto, hai tutte le tue comodità... stattenne a casa. Non ci devi andare in piazza, perché in piazza ci sono tutte le contaminazioni. Ho notato che non c'è nemmeno in altre città industriali. quindi è una disposizione occulta.”

unique aspect, rather than detracting from its significance, adds depth to its story and underscores its importance in the evolution of urban planning.

Hence, it merits recognition as a noteworthy architectural paradigm, serving as a testament to a past era.

Drawing parallels with the industrial city of Ivrea's Complesso Olivetti, designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2018, we can see how both, in different ways showcase how paternalistic ideals could inspire urban planning that blends industry, nature, and community.

Rosignano Solvay is a distinctive illustration of an industrial city that remains partially operational and has, over time, progressed from its initial origins to transform into a thriving, dynamic environment that goes beyond its industrial history.

Similar to Ivrea being designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Rosignano should possibly strive for such acknowledgment as well. This recognition would not only celebrate the town's architectural and historical significance but also provide an opportunity to explore the evolution of urban planning theories and their effects on society.¹²

Thus, photography becomes an instrument of communication not only of an instantaneous frame but of a cross-section of history strongly linked to the social, philosophical, and political world becoming a representative instrument of the scenario related to the time of Italy's industrial conversion and international relations of development that determined the advent of new ideologies and new ways of living and therefore at the same time of conceiving the city and urban planning. Experiments that have in fact changed the way of life of entire generations, experiments that have in fact changed the fate of Italy and therefore of the present day.

Photography is thus still able to become a communication tool capable of talking about history, ideologies, geography, power games, urban planning and philosophy, ways of life, and everything that is part of our present world.¹³

¹² The text up to this point was written by Giulia Gabriella Sagarriga Visconti.

¹³ The text up to this point was written by Chiara Simoncini and Giulia Gabriella Sagarriga Visconti.



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