# Adriano Olivetti's notion of "Community": transforming the factory and urban physical space into educational spaces

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#### **Abstract**

Adriano Olivetti (1901-1960), the well-known intellectual and entrepreneur who created the factory which produced the typewriters and calculators that became icons of design and efficiency around the world, considered Saint Augustine's *The City of God* the first attempt to explore the concept of "Community". Following in Augustine's footsteps, Olivetti described *The City of Men* (1960), a systemic territorial, political, administrative, economic and cultural entity tailored to the needs of individuals, where people could fully realise their inner potential. He called this conceptual and concrete entity the "Community", sowing the seed that would lead to the moral and civil reconstruction of postwar Italy whose aim was to merge the country's productive-industrial and political-social worlds. This paper attempts to outline the development of Olivetti's thinking about "Community", from the functionality of production and urban spaces to their educational potential: thanks to the influence of personalist thinking, the material forces that created a productive-industrial/residential-social modernity were transformed into educational-spiritual forces at the service of people within the community.

Adriano Olivetti (1901-1960), il noto intellettuale e imprenditore della fabbrica di macchine da scrivere e calcolatori elettronici, icone di design e di efficienza a livello mondiale, parte dalla *Città di Dio* di Sant'Agostino, che ritiene il primo trattato sulla "Comunità", per delineare la *Città dell'uomo* (1960) ovvero un'entità territoriale, politica, amministrativa, economica e culturale di tipo sistemico a servizio della persona e dove la persona esprime pienamente la propria interiorità. Tale entità concettuale e concreta prende il nome di "comunità" e si propone come nucleo portante di rifondazione morale e civile dell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra mirando a un'alleanza tra mondo produttivo-industriale e mondo politico-sociale. La presente ricerca intende delineare lo sviluppo del pensiero di Olivetti attorno al tema della "Comunità" dimostrandone l'evoluzione dalla funzionalità degli spazi produttivi e urbanistici alle potenzialità educative di quegli stessi spazi. Le forze materiali, che hanno dato vita alla modernità produttivo-industriale e abitativo-sociale, hanno assunto finalità educativo-spirituali poste al servizio della persona nella comunità grazie all'influenza del pensiero personalista.

**Keywords:** history of educational institutions; aesthetics of space; city planning and education; industry and education; 20th Century

**Parole chiave:** storia delle istituzioni educative; estetica dello spazio; urbanistica ed educazione; industria ed educazione; XX secolo



### 1. Introduction

The journal *Comunità* [*Community*] was first published in March 1946. Adriano Olivetti saw the periodical as a vital focus of a cultural debate in which he set out to be the architect of Italy's reconstruction: amid the rubble of war he laid new foundations for the building of a better world. Ignazio Silone's editorial, Il mondo che nasce [The World That Is Being Born], (Silone, 1946) accompanied by an editorial entitled Aver fede [Have Faith], are paradigmatic: though signed off by the *Comunità* (Aver fede, 1946, p. 1) (Fig. 1) the thinking and programmatic slant of Adriano Olivetti is clearly discernible.

Seeing things with new eyes means seeing a human, *truly* human world, a world founded on natural laws which are eternal and, as such, imbue action with life and vigour because action does not revolve around itself. It is part of a new society replete with peace and resplendent with beauty. Seeing things clearly means seeing beyond the obscure currents of an obscure situation, like light on the far side of a mirror, so that order may be created from disorder (Aver fede, 1946, p. 1).

Olivetti's need to help create a new Italian society that would reconcile respect for nature and respect for human identity began to take shape during the Second World War when he had spent a long time in Switzerland to avoid deportation to concentration camps on account of his Jewish ancestry and anti-Fascist views (Ochetto, 2018, pp. 99-109). His sojourn in Switzerland gave him the opportunity to study the philosophical thinking of authors whose trenchant views on the spiritual freedom of human beings, and the intrinsic link between people and society within an overarching Christian vision of restlessness, had attracted his attention. Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier and Simone Weil provided a solid foundation (Ochetto, 2018, pp. 111-126) on which to build his own philosophy, lending completeness and direction to his role as an Italian entrepreneur at the head of the typewriter and calculator factory that bore his name by connecting it to and integrating it with the social and cultural fabric of society at large. The new world that was emerging would have to embark on a third way between Capitalism and Marxism which in Olivetti's view would be implemented through the concept and experience of the *Community* (Olivetti, 1952a).

### 2. Factory experience: Community as life

Olivetti's strong commitment in the 1920s, and then in the 1930s when he took over from his father Camillo as head of the firm (Olivetti, 1949), was chiefly directed at updating the organisational efficiency of company's methods and procedures in human terms to overcome the risk of worker alienation which Taylor's model tended to create. Thus, the restructuring of the production system by means of "scientific organisation" means replacing production chains with "production islands" (Fig.2). As well as boosting and improving productivity, this also raised workers' awareness of the purpose of what they were doing, the importance of team work, of imitating what other team members were doing, and the need to develop skills that could make their jobs interchangeable and boost professionalism (Novara, 1973). Alongside the organisational strategies that had been systematically adopted after Olivetti's tour of the USA in 1925 (Olivetti, 2016), he also felt that the workplace itself needed rethinking. The inhumanity of workplaces was also due to their frequent gloominess, dirtiness and bareness which engendered feelings of alienation and duress in relation to the natural world. Adriano Olivetti had felt this oppressive unease at the



age of thirteen when he first visited his father's factory. As an adult he was convinced that the factory should be reorganised, given the influence of its spaces on the well-being of its workers and productive output (Ochetto, 2018, p. 24).

This led to major architectural restructuring of the factory at the hands of Luigi Figini and Leo Pollini, who were major exponents of Italian rationalism. Thus, 1935 saw the construction alongside the existing red-brick factory of a glass-walled building (Fig. 3) that would flood the workplace with light, enabling workers to follow the natural cycle of the seasons while avoiding enforced isolation from the natural environment and its rhythms (Olivetti, 1956). Having reluctantly left the countryside for better-paid factory work, workers could at least play a background role in its activities during the course of the day, achieving a more stable psychological equilibrium and awareness of time passing. Shorter working hours leaving more free time for the family, cultural pursuits, study, etc. aimed to restore the workers' dignity and enhance the possibilities for self-improvement, all of which helped the company itself to grow (Olivetti, 1956). In time, investment in human resources became vital to company development. Camillo Olivetti had already been aware of the need to take good care of his workers - his proprietorialartisanal management of the factory in Ivrea had always rejected the notion that workers were mere numbers (Olivetti, 1954). His approach was boosted further in 1932 when Adriano became managing director and set about accelerating the process of industrialisation, which meant injecting new life blood by changing the way in which the factory was managed. The "self-made man" epitomised by Domenico Burzio, who had spent his entire working life at Olivetti where he developed his professional skills by sacrificing his career as technical director for the good of the factory (Ochetto, 2018, pp. 33-34), was transformed by Adriano into a man with specific skills acquired through high-level training. The new managers were chosen by Adriano himself from graduates of Turin Polytechnic, thereby creating a company organisational chart based on professionalism and tasks rather than exclusively on hierarchical relationships as before (Olivetti, 1949). Every change had profound implications at the human level and both sides of the reciprocal relationship could no longer be ignored. In 1949, in an article in the journal Il Ponte dated 1949, Olivetti stated that during the interwar period "the social component was totally lacking throughout the organisation" (Olivetti, 1949, p. 1046) and that he was gradually broadening his understanding and appreciation of the paternal leadership that could be summarised as "two unusual principles: kindness and tolerance" (Olivetti, 1949, p. 1046). By applying continuity of principles and discontinuity of forms and methods, Adriano gave concrete answers to the unvoiced requests of workers by creating a wide-ranging social security network. 1932 saw the creation of the "Burzio Fund" (Fig. 4), named after the faithful employee mentioned earlier, to compensate for sudden and unforeseen economic problems in workers' families. Health problems were one of his immediate concerns: he set up a company health service to make good the total inefficiency of the existing Sickness Benefit Funds by assuming responsibility not only for workers but also their immediate family members. This funding soon turned into medical care and prevention, as well as the education of individuals themselves. The measures were specific and down-to-earth. 1934 saw the creation within the factory of an infirmary and convalescent home which also catered for members of workers' families. In Champoluc the first summer camp was created to enable children to make good use of their holidays (Fig. 5). In 1935 a nursery school (Fig. 6) and kindergarten (Fig. 7) were created, once again built by Figini and Pollini and based on Montessori's educational principles, to cater to the needs of workers' children aged from six months to six years. Nine months of almost totally reimbursed maternity leave was already available to workers. At the factory, 1936 saw the opening of a futuristic self-service canteen intended especially for workers who were a long way from home. Healthy eating was seen as fundamental to physical well-being and working efficiency.



On the social aid front, Olivetti shifted his focus to cultural development by setting up technical and professional schools and, from 1936, awarding grants that would enable young people to go to university. In the same year he opened a library (Fig. 8) both to lend out books and provide in-house consultation. Some of the library's extraordinarily modern and far-sighted features included the number and variety of books available-approximately 25,000, including a newspaper library of 800 magazines that carried many of the international and scientific publications that Olivetti himself had deemed worthy of subscribing to during his US tour-and free access to the library even during working hours, in the belief that this would encourage workers to read and appreciate the educational value of books, making them more effective in the workplace (Olivetti, 1953).

The broad spectrum of innovative changes introduced by Adriano Olivetti in the 1920s and 1930s centred on the importance of the factory as an indissoluble marriage of profit and the promotion of human resources. Both were seen as goals to be achieved, though productivity was seen as the pursuit of rather than a prerequisite for human goals.

This initial experiential blueprint led to expansion of the factory in several areas where economic, social and cultural well-being were further stimulated by the structuring and organisation of factory spaces whose functionality and beauty contributed to the all-round performance and satisfaction of workers. Concern for the working environment became a key consideration that determined important entrepreneurial, design and experimental choices involving rationalist architects capable of placing art and aesthetics at the service of the company, thereby creating new unifying links between industry, culture and the promotion of human resources.

The groundwork was laid for a new developmental phase in Olivetti's entrepreneurial activities deriving from broadly-based postwar theorising that moved from analysis to the implicit question this raised for Adriano: "I saw that every problem with the factory was becoming an external one, and that only someone who had been able to coordinate internal and external problems would succeed in finding the correct solution to everything" (Olivetti, 1949, p. 1045).

In reality, a company cannot exist as an inward-looking, self-subsistent monad. It continually questions and refers to what lies around it – institutions and civil society – so that they will jointly address situations and offer concrete synergic solutions leading to an organic, workable notion of how to reboot companies and unify the context in which they work.

### 3. The Community as a concrete idea

While the concept of Community was already implicit in Olivetti's entrepreneurial decision-making in 1930, it became explicit in his article *The Idea of a True Community* published in 1946 in the first issue of *Comunità* [Community]. Its range and systematic nature made it truly programmatic. We know from an earlier draft dated 1944 in *Memorandum* that it would later become *L'ordine politico delle Comunità* (1945) [The Political Order of Communities]. The possibility for human beings to be fully themselves in harmony with their surrounding environment is given by the sense of belonging to a territory that is a harmonious and efficient organism based on a sinergical relationship between human beings and nature which they feel, they belong to and love, in addition to brotherly and sisterly relations with other people. In this sense, the Community is seen as concrete entity whose parts are harmoniously interrelated, a concept of community harks back to a systemic *ante litteram* concept in which people can express a vocation that reveals itself through "humanity and spirituality" (Olivetti, 1946, p. 4).



Though as yet undeclared, the influence of Maritain is evident when Olivetti says: "If the aim of communal and individual existence is primarily the spiritual improvement of personality, the link between the spiritual and the material is such that harmonious means of improvement are indispensable in any case" (Olivetti, 1946, p. 4).

The improvement available to people of a philosophical bent becomes an educational tendency which requires suitable organisational contexts if it is to express itself in the practicalities of life. According to Olivetti, this context is the Community: with its medium-sized towns and agricultural areas, it simultaneously supports the agricultural and industrial economies. The task of urban planning should be to turn "large alveolar cities into urban organisms in which they regain their full stature and people, both at and outside work, have the perception of a completer, more harmonious life" (Olivetti, 1946, p. 4) because they can count on "educational, recreational and cultural oases" (Olivetti, 1946, p. 4). The dialogical assumption linking theoretical thought and urban planning became the key to Olivetti's intellectual endeavours from 1946 to his sudden death in 1960 (Ochetto, 2018, p. 271). During this period, one notes a circularity in his thinking when analysing the various channels through which it achieved expression. The version in Comunità seems to predate a more organic version revisited more thoroughly in Società, Stato, Comunità (1952) which seems to have been influenced by the multiple perspectives on cultural debate present in the Comunità itself. In other words, the 1946 article appears to be a programmatic manifesto that would be followed by several other trains of thought. There are articles which cite examples of social projects that had been implemented, as well as examples of projects undertaken outside Italy whose success made them suitable for adoption in Italy. Olivetti insists on the need to reorganise healthcare, citing successful initiatives in Great Britain and Sweden (Lichtner, 1946, p. 5; Laski, 1946, p. 5; Anderson, 1946, p. 5).

A second line of thought invites a rethink of the government's political action in the Consituent Assembly from 1946 to 1948. In his article *Non si cammina nel futuro* [We don't walk into the future], (Olivetti, 1947, p. 1) Olivetti says that a policy based solely on future projects, losing sight of how the world is now, is destined to fail. He invites us to "restore human beings to themselves", which he sees as "the truly revolutionary aspect of all revolutions" (Olivetti, 1947, p. 1). So he draws attention to the sense of concreteness inherent in politics with a theoretical underpinning, which leads to the conclusion that a federalist line comes closest to meeting territorial needs. On the other hand, he warns against the ideological approaches he defines as neofascist in which it is the action preceding *a posteriori* theoretical elaboration that justifies the practice.

The third line of thought is concerned with urban planning, which acts as a hinge connecting political and social thinking. Olivetti's collaboration with urban planners at the Milan-based BBPR studio, and with Figini e Pollini, was already common knowledge in the 1930s. In 1946 the periodical returned to the subject time and again in articles dealing with avant-garde planning projects such as a temporary workers' village (R. S., 1946, p. 9) in the USA, Sweden's first supermarkets (1947, p. 1), school canteens (Usis, 1947, p. 4) and the blueprint for a small town in the USA (Alatri, 1946, p. 3), all of which were concrete examples of Community. However, the Athens Charter is of key importance. This urban redevelopment was presented in 1933 at the *IV Congresso internazionale di architettura moderna* (CIAM; International Congress of Modern Architecture) with the title *The Functional Home*, and was subsequently published in France in 1943. Le Corbusier seems to have been its principal draughtsman, although he signed its republication only in 1957. In Italy, Olivetti piloted its publication as a book in 1960.

It starts with the consideration that the situation in towns and cities had become critical with the advent of machines, and that any rethinking of towns and cities should seek to "defend the natural human condition not against but inside machines" (Mazzucchelli, 1946, p. 8). Consequently, the urban planner's rule of thumb should be the human being when determining the proportions between housing, workplaces and leisure facilities, stressing that



towns and cities should have areas designed for recreation and rest that relate harmoniously with nature, meaning that how places are naturally shaped should be taken into account. People's well-being should be safeguarded and the idea emerges of free time during which areas for play and sport for "children, adolescents and adults" would be provided, offering meeting areas, "children's gardens" and schools (Mazzucchelli, 1946, p. 9). The predominantly secular notion of a civic centre rather than a church, the traditional meeting area for children, is suggestive, as is "Kindergarten" which points to Froebel's notion of children education and the bond between children and the environment. All this was crucial to Olivetti's practical concept of Community and the ideas were quickly put into practice with the town plan for Aosta drawn up by BBPR (1943) and the Canavese community centres (1949), as well as in theoretical studies like L'ordine politico delle Comunità (1945) [The Political Order of Communities] and Società, Stato, Comunità (1952) [Society, State, Community]. Adopting a concept dear to Mounier, the Community is described as a "living organism", which is, overall, a more systematic rendering of the links between solutions and their practical implementation than the one offered in the original texts. Mounier and his Esprit magazine were beacons for Olivetti because they offered him convincing answers to the moral proddings he was assailed by. On the one hand, Mounier's "personal and communal revolution" asserted the primacy of personal values over individualism; on the other, it enabled individual isolation to be overcome and valued the primitive nature of "the bond that unites human beings". Hence the birth of a so-called "spiritual revolution" based on order, freedom, spontaneity and unity (Agosti, 1961, pp. 232-233).

All this enabled Olivetti to reflect on the central role of human beings in general. Though he does not actually say so, he borrows an unusual phrase from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: "The question I ask myself is whether human beings will be happy or not, prosperous and comfortably protected. [...] I prefer the nomad who is continually on the move and makes each day beautiful because he serves a lord of such vast proportions. [...] I love how human beings give their light. And the poverty of the candle does not concern me. Its flame alone is my measure of its quality" (Olivetti, 1956, p. 114).

In an Enlightenment perspective, happiness and wealth are the goals of self-realisation, but human beings yearn to be fully themselves in terms of the spiritual freedom they are able to express. "Spiritual forces" (Olivetti, 1960, pp. 27-36) preside over self-expression and the building of a concept of community. An evangelical reading of this would be that the search for justice and truth is disinterested, i.e. responding to the law of love and what comes from it is a great and unexpected gift of beauty. The spiritual force of beauty is the cornerstone of Olivetti's notion of Community: it welds together the speculative phase and urban planning solutions by achieving the transformation of physical space into educational space for human beings.

The Aristotelian concept of beauty – order and proportion in its constituent features, elegance and neatness of form and colour – reappears in his writings where he quotes *The Gospel According To Matthew*: "Order certainly possesses divine power because it is only through it that the beauty of number and quality can be revealed". From this comes the theorising of a Community in which the aesthetic care over space becomes attention to proportions as the search for harmony and inner peace. Olivetti's phrase "We dream silence" (1956) is a provocative reflection on the fact that lack of organisation, proportion and order in urban spaces like factories creates confusion and lack of respect for personal well-being. By contrast, through the agency of beauty the Community generates silence, i.e. peace and harmony between people and their environment enables them to listen to the sounds of nature rather than the annoying sounds resulting from the degradation of unplanned urban construction. Horizontality is preferable to verticality, and decentralised housing (synonymous with civilised living) is preferable to sprawling urban conglomerates. Olivetti brought all these ideas to bear on the construction of his factory. After the more famous



glass building in Ivrea came the factory in Pozzuoli (1955) and the rehabilitation of Matera and its famous cave-houses with the building of the La Martella agricultural village (1952-54), the prototype of the new rural community (Segre, 2015, pp. 73-84). The notion of beauty makes circular thinking possible. Olivetti stresses the importance of "continuous interchange between practice and ideal" as a rule of conduct and, with regard to the spiritual power of beauty, observes that if the relationship with sound practice is assured by architecture and, more generally, by art and culture, it should be added that the key aspect of architecture is its ability to transform the growth of personal identity. Living in and benefiting from a functional though well governed living, working and social environment encourages people to relate better to themselves, refines their aesthetic taste and stimulates their curiosity about what culture has to offer. John Ruskin seems to live again in Olivetti. His view was that all people of all social classes should have access to all types of arts because art boosts interiority, helps people to contemplate the beauty of nature and assume responsibility for the environment and community through their sense of belonging. This triggers a form of aesthetic education that generates a sense of active citizenship, an active concern for and encouragement of communal living that enriches the awareness of those involved in it. In other words, planning the future. Underlying all this is Simone Weil's conviction that:

We owe our respect to a collectivity, of whatever kind – country, family or any other – not for itself, but because it is food for a certain number of human souls ... The degree of respect owed to human collectivities must be very high, and for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, each of them is unique and cannot be replaced if it is destroyed. [...]. The nourishment that a collectivity provides its members with has no equivalent anywhere in the universe. Then, as it lasts, the collectivity already penetrates the future. [...] It has its roots in the past (Olivetti, 1956, p. 115).

Far from being self-referential, the aesthetic dimension nourishes and is nourished by the Community, generating a systemic, synchronic dynamism between its members and a generative, diachronic dynamism between past, present and future.

This unified sense of spiritual forces which characterises and orients the Community allows people to experience physical space and its transformative potential within an educational context of complete self-realisation in every area of their private, social and working lives. It was in this alliance between the entrepreneurial, social and environmental worlds that Olivetti felt he could bring about the "third industrial revolution" (Olivetti, 1952b) through which a better future could be built. Was this visionary thinking on his part? His ideas were realised in the town plan for Canavese, the Pozzuoli industrial complex and the La Martella precinct in Matera, so his ideas were more than statements of principle (Segre, 2015). Certainly, Olivetti hoped for a much broader transformation of Italian society, though this never materialised because of the unsatisfactory political role adopted by Adriano Olivetti. As an exceptional entrepreneur and intellectual, he was adverse to compromise and remained rather isolated on account of his revolutionary principles. Both his thinking and his industrial and town-planning achievements are relevant even today as blueprints for humanised living spaces, factories and social facilities, ones that engage the entire person. In this sense, Olivetti was a visionary. Even today we can admire the scope and educational importance of his achievements.





Figure 1: the first issue of monthly Comunità (Comunità. 1946, 1 (1), p. 1)



Figure 2: Olivetti, Ivrea, 1955-60. "Associazione Archivio Storico Olivetti" - Ivrea, Italy<sup>i</sup>





Figure 3: Olivetti, Ivrea. "Associazione Archivio Storico Olivetti" (Ivrea, Italy)<sup>ii</sup>

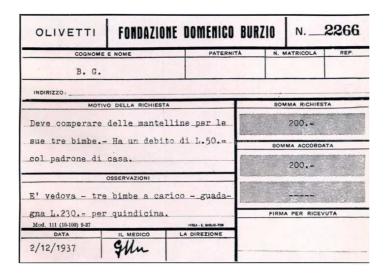


Figure 4: Burzio's Found. From - "Associazione Archivio Storico Olivetti" (Ivrea, Italy)<sup>iii</sup>





Figure 5: Champoluc summer camp. "Associazione Archivio Storico Olivetti" (Ivrea, Italy)iv



Figure 6: nursery school. "Associazione Archivio Storico Olivetti" (Ivrea, Italy)<sup>v</sup>



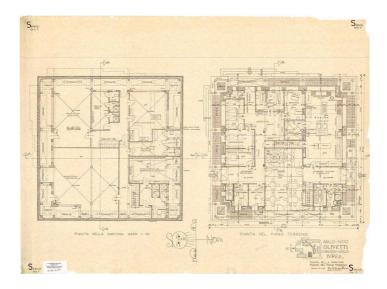


Figure 7: kindergarten, map. "Associazione Archivio Storico Olivetti" (Ivrea, Italy)<sup>vi</sup>



Figure 8: library. "Associazione Archivio Storico Olivetti" (Ivrea, Italy) vii



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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> From: http://www.imprese.san.beniculturali.it/web/imprese/gallery/dettaglio-oggetto-digitale?titolo\_origine=Galleria%20Multimediale&css\_tit=gallery-result-tit&pid=san.dl.SAN:IMG-00001817 (Accessed March 9, 2020).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>ii</sup> From: http://www.imprese.san.beniculturali.it/web/imprese/gallery/dettaglio-oggetto-digitale?titolo\_origine=Galleria%20Multimediale&css\_tit=gallery-result-tit&pid=san.dl.SAN:IMG-01376322 (Accessed March 9, 2020).

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