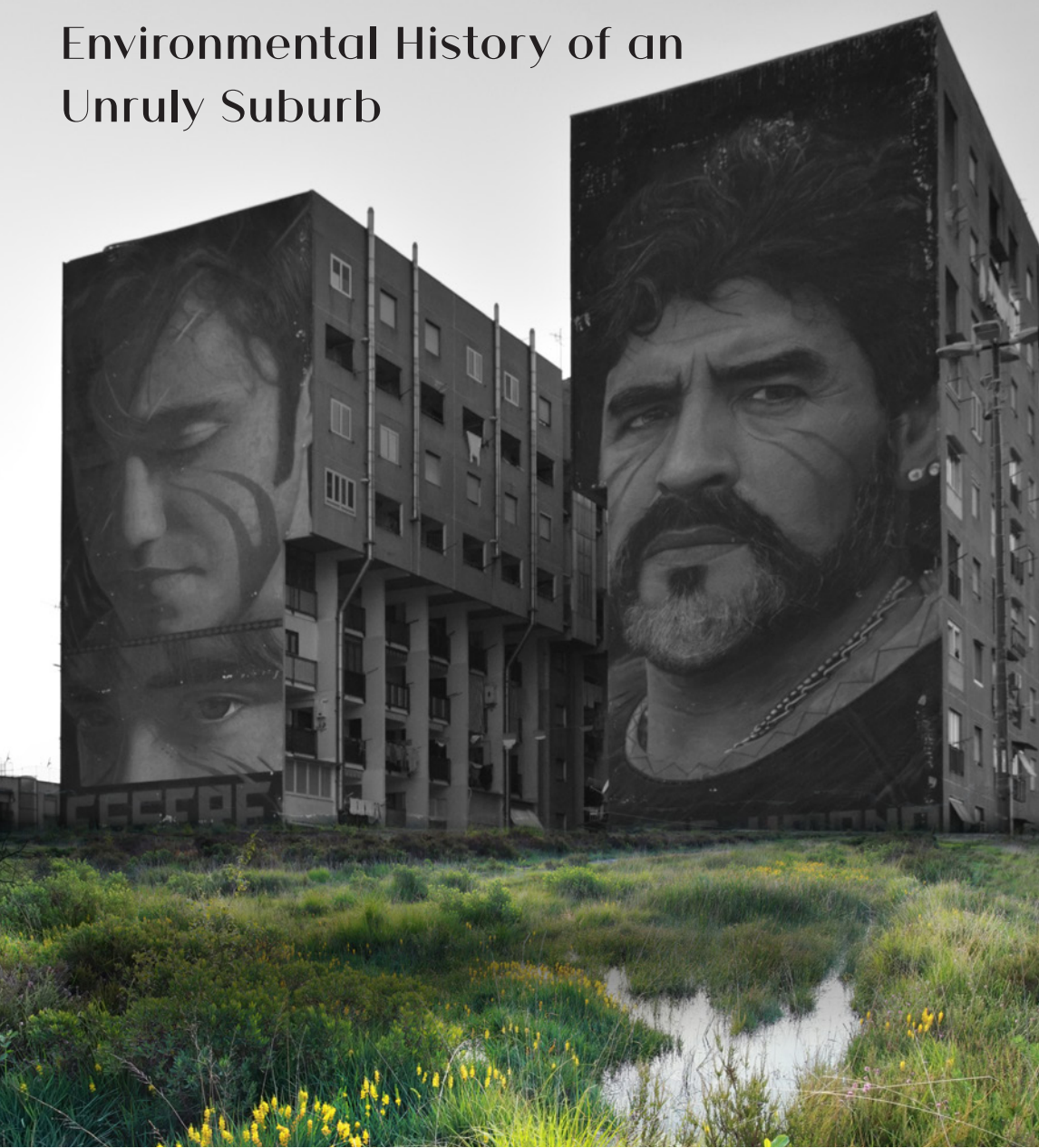


Valerio Caruso

The Swamp of East Naples

Environmental History of an
Unruly Suburb



INTRODUCTION

Starting at Naples Central Station and riding by train to the eastern area of the city, tourists or (more-or-less) casual observers can certainly drink in peculiar landscapes with their eyes, but these are rarely such as delight the aesthetic spirit. The tracks of the State Railway (Ferrovie dello Stato) tracks and the futuristic skyline of the Centro Direzionale of Naples soon give way to endless expanses of warehouses and containers marked mostly with the same logos that assail drivers or passers-by from the windows and shop signs of the Gianturco neighbourhoods and Poggioreale Industrial Area, the gateway to eastern Naples. Continuing along the railway track, the long wall of containers crumbles before the eyes, now drawn by the imposing skeleton of the Tobacco Factory (Manifattura Tabacchi). On the opposite side, the silhouettes of the tanks and buildings of the oil area are visible. The nocturnal image offered by the disused tobacco factory might well stimulate the fantasies of a horror film writer, captivated by these large and ghostly halls only occasionally illuminated by the reflection of the nearby university residences; in reality, a deep and more justified sense of terror be aroused by reflecting on both past disasters and the destructive potential still anchored to the bottom of the immense cesspool that was and is the oil area of east Naples. Carefully hidden from view, even today, the effects persist of a terrible explosion one morning in 1985 that, for a moment, seemed another earthquake, five years after the horrific 1980 earthquake in Irpinia, or perhaps a new awakening of Vesuvius. On the other hand, it is clear that the supposedly rational desire for profit has thrust a limitless powder keg into the urban fabric of East Naples, close to the residential blocks of San Giovanni, Ponticelli, Gianturco, Poggioreale and Barra, the main centres of the eastern area. Ignoring for a moment its destructive effects, in its utter vastness, the oil area may be viewed as a further and autonomous district of the eastern area, characterised not by the chaotic vitality of the surrounding area but by the immovable strategic needs of oil as a resource.

Proceeding along the railway line, we witness the gradual densification of public housing, both planned and spontaneous and unregulated, the latter on the degraded remains of assorted old factories. Towards the sea, only the most alert observer will see the crenelated silhouette of the extraordinary former Cirio canning plant, in the Vigliena area: an architectural masterpiece whose value has recently been recognised, not surprisingly, by the artists of

the San Carlo Theatre, who have installed a scenography workshop there. Far less aesthetically-pleasing, however, are the two thermoelectric power plants opposite, whose relentless whistles signal the enduring activity of at least one or the other. Along the eastern shore of Naples, a mixed landscape dominates, made up mostly of housing, often integrated with disused factories, interspersed with manufacturing and artisan activities, small pockets of agricultural activity that have held out against the tide of urbanisation and large dilapidated industrial skeletons, too often condemned to eternal abandonment.

Upon reaching the San Giovanni-Barra stop, the immense profile of a former armament factory, the ex-Corradini factory, cannot fail to intrigue the passenger with its imposing architecture comprehensively invaded by weeds: the same destiny that befell the old mills, the tanneries, the canning factories scattered all over the San Giovanni a Teduccio district, or the heterogeneous, small enterprises, once productive, interspersed with barrack-like public housing barracks and greenhouses or horticultural areas in the Ponticelli and Barra districts. The last part of the journey is all close to the coastline, yet the sea remains invisible, occluded by residences and small, old coastal factories, some active and others converted to homes. This barrier between the neighbourhood and the sea extends to the dilapidated San Giovanni a Teduccio water purification plant, recently decommissioned, almost on the border with the municipality of Portici, the eastern limit of Naples. Immediately afterwards, you can enjoy a unique moment. Perhaps it is mere aesthetic contrast, but the sudden spectacle of the Gulf of Naples in its entirety, from Posillipo to Sorrento, manages to capture even the most hardened and addicted commuter with its nuances, not to mention the tourist, who may be enchanted by a sunrise, a zenith, a sunset or a moon reflected in the waters of the Gulf. It is only a very short stretch, a few hundred metres travelled by a train that paradoxically runs close to the seafront of San Giovanni a Teduccio, disturbing its quiet: therefore, this is nothing more than an optical illusion, as well as a snapshot of the chaotic, dysfunctional relationship between the natural and the built in east Naples. Finally, passing the chain of Vesuvian villas, once magnificent noble residences but today too often besmirched by concrete and steel, we reach the splendid National Railway Museum of Pietrarsa, the final destination of this short journey and a rare virtuous example of redevelopment.

If the spatial path into the eastern area of Naples follows the neat linear paths of the road and railway arteries, the historical trajectory of the suburban

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environment through the processes of urbanisation, industrialisation and deindustrialisation is much more bumpy and tortuous; and these processes are anything but pre-determined or terminal. In this book, the discussion of territorial and environmental issues will focus on the structural characteristics of the ecological unsustainability of East Naples. Digging down the layers of historical sedimentation, one reaches a source as richly metaphorical as it is literal in its emergence from the volcanic soils of the eastern plain of Naples to generate a marshy ecosystem. The swamp has imposed its will on the ground from time immemorial and some glimpses of it are, very rarely, still identifiable. The marshes or *parule* of the modern age, in various ways protagonists of the first chapter of this work, represent the human attempt to rationalise and bend that chaotic ecosystem to the cycles of agriculture and to a particularly profitable agricultural model, organised into gardens and orchards. Later, the model of rationalisation of the territory that was promoted from the early contemporary age will be dominated by the industrial paradigm, accompanied and mixed with residential and infrastructural expansion, in compliance with certain, repeated urban choices and development models that have dominated the mentality of administrators, both local and national. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, for over a century, eastern Naples has been an industrial suburb. In spite of a centuries-old heterogeneity in the use of space, the industrial dimension will persist and proliferate as long as advantageous territorial and economic conditions exist and as long as the presence of secondary production is socially hegemonic, ideologically enhanced and ecologically tolerated.

From the late 1960s, the area has been affected by a slow process of deindustrialisation, still in progress, accompanied by ongoing environmental degradation. What are the characteristics of this new phase? And, above all, are its processes interconnected? The choice to privilege the central period of local deindustrialisation derives from today's collective perception of the phenomenon, translated into critical terms: one of the specific objects of this research is to distinguish between the actual impact of deindustrialisation processes on the degraded nature of eastern Naples and the impacts of incidental events. Likewise, emphasis will be placed on entrepreneurial, institutional and urban planning choices, attempting to identify their respective levels of responsibility in defining local processes of environmental degradation. The crux is, therefore, an attempt to intertwine territorial problems with the socio-economic sphere, as two sides of the same coin: in other words, to research and connect the causes of economic decline and environmental

degradation in a single systemic perspective. The research covers a chronological span that roughly coincides with the history of local industry and its decline, with some preliminary forays into the late modern period and some corresponding concluding hints towards current events. In the first part of the book, a brief description is offered of the geographical and historical characteristics of the East Naples area, running through the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation. The core of the study, in the second and third parts, is the causes of and dynamics triggered by deindustrialisation, relating environmental disputes and ecological risks affecting the eastern territory of Naples between the end of the 1960s and the end of the 1990s.

Methodologically, in addition to research specifically dedicated to the East Naples area, which will often be interrogated through the text, reference is made to the established trend of European and US urban environmental history and the increasingly rich field of deindustrialisation studies. Thus, an attempt will be made to give shape to a discourse that can be both economic and ecological, the basis of which is the interpretation of the numerous political, entrepreneurial and urban planning choices made for the area, without the arrogance of assigning blame or issuing judgment, but with the aim of understanding the historical sedimentation of the urbanisation processes affecting the suburbs east of Naples and assessing its environmental sustainability. These trajectories will also be useful moorings for some significant forays into the political world and into the imaginaries of local society, often observed and described through the eyes and words of protagonists. The oral testimonies collected and transcribed in full in the Appendices section will therefore offer multiple ideas and elements for reflection, which affect in various ways all the areas mentioned: beyond the aims of this book, the economic, social, political, daily, urbanistic and ecological framework sketched by the oral testimonies will undoubtedly support researchers and fascinate readers. The interviews will be inserted in an interpretive framework that includes primary and bibliographic sources, collected mainly in the Urban Planning Archives, in the municipal library 'Antonio Labriola' of San Giovanni a Teduccio, through the digital archives of some national newspapers, via local and national statistical services and studies and, last but not least, thanks to the invaluable support of all the people mentioned below.

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