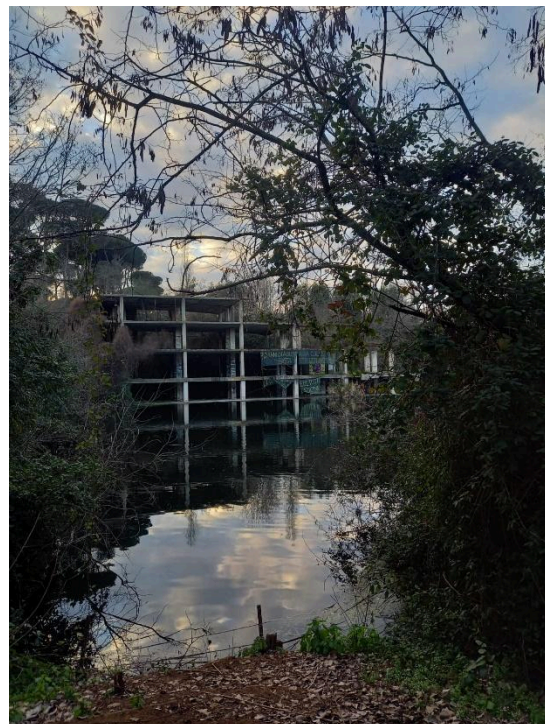


# The Ex-SNIA in Rome: a more-than-human transformation of a former chemical plant

*By Cecilia Pasini*

The initiative is the re-appropriation of a former industrial chemical plant that produced viscose, the ex CISA/SNIA Viscosa, in Rome. The abandoned plant has been partly occupied by activists and citizens and re-used, through a re-signification and re-territorialization (Maggioli and Tabusi, 2016) of the former plant in ruins and the creation of a new park, spaces for the community, and an archive of the former workers.



*Photo of Lago Bullicante and abandoned ruins of the shopping centre project.*

*By Cecilia Pasini*

## **Where is this grassroots initiative? Who are the promoters? Who are the beneficiaries?**

The ex-Snia is located in Rome, the Italian capital city, in the neighbourhood of *Pigneto-Prenestino* and bordered by *via Prenestina* and *via di Portonaccio*. It is now called *Parco delle Energie* (Energy Park) because it became a public park as a result of the grassroots initiative. The area covers a total of 14 hectares, 6.5 of which are public. In the park stands the Park House and the *Quadrato*, a skate park where activities, festivals and sports tournaments are organized. The Park House, which in the past was one of the two structures used as a dormitory for factory workers, is a

public space managed by the *Forum Territoriale Permanente del Parco delle Energie* (Permanent Territorial Forum of the Energy Park, from now on “Forum”) in agreement with the City Hall, (AAVV, 2023). The Forum is a civic body built up over the years during the activists’ struggles to protect and manage the area.

The *Centro Documentazione Territoriale Maria Baccante – Archivio storico Viscosa* (Maria Baccante Territorial Documentation Centre – Historical archive Viscose) is hosted in the Park House and is dedicated to a former worker and partisan in the Italian Resistance. The archive collects documents abandoned by the former Snia Viscosa direction after the closure of the firm. It is managed through an assembly that meets weekly<sup>1</sup>, made by activists and inhabitants of the neighbourhood with a special biographic relationship to the plant, some of them have professional skills in the conservation of archives. The archive has an institutional recognition since 2012, when the Regional Directorate for Cultural and Landscape Heritage of Lazio recognised its value.

Inside the park, there is a natural lake, which leaked from the underground water table during work on the construction of a shopping centre in the early 1990s. The emergence of the lake and the consequent arrival of several people and nonhuman species, especially birds, has been an important turning point in the initiative. In a sense, the initiative is a form of creation of multispecies relationships based on the protection of commons, in which a coalition between human and nonhuman actors is made possible with relevant positive consequences.

Everyone in the neighbourhood and abroad can benefit from the initiative. Thanks to the presence of the park, the community centre and the archive Maria Baccante, the place is visited by relatives of former workers who want to reconstruct their family history as well as researchers, students, industrial history enthusiasts, and even by the curious who want to learn more about the city.

**How does this initiative engage with climate? Does it tackle mitigation, adaptation, both, or other dimensions of climate change?**

The initiative is against soil exploitation by economic powers, the big firms and the political elites. It tries to defend the area as a common good, preserve the park, and have more places where the community can meet. Activists act to safeguard and increase biodiversity, raise among the inhabitants of the neighbourhood awareness of the importance of green areas, the development of a civic sense, and of awareness of collective goods. The initiative also tries to do something out of the waste and ruins of the deindustrialization process, with a practice that overcomes the sense of loss

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<sup>1</sup> Ethnographic observation of the initiative, 11-12 June 2023.

(Elliott, 2018). It opposes the ruination and waste of a post-industrial area, claiming the need of commoning and creating new forms of relationships (Armiero, 2021). It is also an opposition to the abandonment of the stories of the neighbourhood. The polluting plant (the industrial complex used highly toxic chemicals, such as carbon disulphide, to create rayon or artificial silk) has created a toxic and noxious heritage (Feltrin, Mah, and Brown, 2022) that has condemned the neighbourhood and its inhabitants to become a wasted community, out of sight for the most. The initiative permits to overturning this perspective by developing alternative visions for the community and its territory.

Additionally, the initiative has been made possible thanks to the emergence of human-nonhuman alliances, and the sudden and bulky entry of the urban wilderness in the area, starting with the birth of the *Bullicante* lake.

### **What are the main objectives? What are the main values?**

The main objectives concern the fight against capitalist power, privatization, resistance to overbuilding and the cementation of natural green areas. The activists want to oppose the new capitalist projects that since the Nineties have aimed to make the area at the service of private interests, asking the municipality for the expropriation of that part of the ex-Snia, which is still privately owned. They consider the park a common good that needs to be owned and used by the community without capitalist exploitation or further privatization. In the words of one of the activists: “We want to be the largest re-naturalised post-industrial settlement in Rome”<sup>2</sup>. The main values concern the protection of urban nature, the importance of creating commons to fight against speculation, and the valorisation of the workers’ stories in an area with a polluted and noxious recent past.

### **What is the timeline? Are there already visible effects?**

The initiative's history is intertwined with the history of the industrial plant and comes from afar. In 1922 the plant was located by the *Società Generale Italiana della Viscosa* (Italian General Society of Viscose) and started its activity in 1923. The choice of the location is influenced, among other reasons, by the massive presence of water in the area. In 1944 an Allied bombing raid hit the factory, severely damaging it. Despite this episode, the factory resumed operations after the Second World War, but began a considerable decline that led to the loss of labour, from over 1,600 workers in 1949 to only around 120 in 1953. The decline was accompanied by demonstrations: in 1949 there was a 40-day occupation of the factory asking to improve working conditions and wages. The

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<sup>2</sup> “Noi vogliamo essere il più grande insediamento post industriale rinaturalizzato di Roma”, source: Ethnographic observation of the initiative, 11-12 June 2023.

factory closed in 1954<sup>3</sup>. In 1969 the land became part of the Snia Viscosa estate, and by 1982 it was owned by the *Società Immobiliare Snia s.r.l.*

In 1990 the builder Antonio Pulcini, through the company *Ponente 1978*, purchased the warehouses and surrounding area (AAVV, 2023). In 1992, he started the construction of a shopping mall. During the excavation for the underground parking, the excavators eroded the *Acqua Bullicante* aquifer. The building site filled up with water and attempts to pump it away through the sewer system failed. On the contrary, the sewer burst and the water leaked out flooding the entire area of the nearby *Largo Preneste*. Then the work finally stopped (Archivio Maria Baccante, 2018). In the following years, the water level stabilised and formed a lake. Its extension is about 10,000 square meters and its depth is about 9 meters, with clean and swimmable waters. On 22 May 1992, a regional decree ordered the cancellation of the building permit for Pulcini's project.

In 1994 the Rome City Council approved the project to turn part of the Snia Viscosa area into a public green area and started the expropriation procedure. In 1995 the former Snia is listed as an area of archaeological interest. The Snia factory is also preserved as industrial archaeology. The same year activists occupied the former warehouses to guard the park that was to be created. On this occasion, the Occupied Social Centre CSOA ex Snia opens (AAVV, 2023).

In the abandoned offices of the former factory, numerous folders with workers' and employees' files, drawings, plans, and blueprints of the technical office, and workers' medical records were found, collected, and safeguarded. In 2012, the Archival Superintendency of Lazio recognised the cultural interest of the archive (Archivio Maria Baccante, 2018). Now these documents, recognised as heritage, are kept in the Park House in the *Centro Documentazione Territoriale Maria Baccante – Archivio storico Viscosa*, constituted in 2015.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.archivioviscosa.org/la-fabbrica/>



*Photo of The Centro Documentazione Territoriale Maria Baccante. Workers' documents.*

*By Cecilia Pasini*

The park opened in 1997 and other areas were expropriated and made public in 2000. In 2007 the Energy Park Committee was created. This is committed to the protection of the existing park and the realisation of a broader park system. The Park Committee will later become part of the Forum. In 2011 the House of the Park and the Forum were born, the municipal administration, the Municipality of Rome VI, various associations, committees, and citizens of the neighbourhood participated in the meetings. In 2011 the WWF *Pigneto Prenestino* Committee is born<sup>4</sup>. In 2014 a thousand people participating in a demonstration obtained the opening of the gate of the former factory and reached the lake and the public green area. The Rome City Council approved a motion tabled by an ecologist political group, which partly incorporated the demands made by the Forum for the protection of the lake, the completion of the expropriation, and the opening to the public of the area around the lake. In the same period, the Forum submitted a request for protection of the former Snia industrial complex.

In 2018 the activists presented an appeal to the President of the Lazio Region to establish the Natural Monument of the former Snia Lake and in 2019 they asked to enlarge the Natural Monument area. In 2020 the President of the Region established the “Lago ex Snia- Viscosa” Natural Monument and placed it under environmental protection. One part of the ex-Snia is still owned by the *Ponente 1978* company which started a project in 2022 with the official aim of “conservative restoration and partial restructuring” (AAVV, 2023). According to the Forum and to

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<sup>4</sup> <http://wwfpignetoprenestino.blogspot.com/>

the local WWF, the real aim is to establish in the area a logistics hub. In the same year, the Forum asks again to the local and regional authorities to enlarge the perimeter of the ex Snia - Viscosa Lake Natural Monument.

**Which limits (institutional, physical, social, etc.) does it encounter?**

The main problem of the initiative seems to be the big dimension of the ex-Snia area that is considered by the municipality and by the privates as a field for private investments and economic exploitation. Nowadays different parts of the area have different statuses and different forms of recognition and protection. Even if the institutions, in particular the Lazio Region, have been active in the protection of the lake, some other decisions seem to stretch out towards interests of privatization. Additionally, the strategy of the promoters of the initiative asking for preservation of the natural and archival heritage has been successful, but at the same time makes the possible future of the initiative strictly connected to the political decisions of the institutional actors.

**Are any shortcomings or critical points visible? What other problematic issues can arise from its implementation?**

The main problem is about the private interests that threaten the stability of the initiative. The majority of the ex-Snia has been expropriated by the municipality, but a part is still privately owned by the *Ponente* 1978 company that is trying to establish a new economic activity.

Another threat is the condition of the buildings where the Snia had its production, which has been polluted for so many years that would need an evaluation of the ecological condition from a technical point of view.

**How would it be potentially replicable in other settings?**

The main strength of the initiative is the capability to build relationships inside and outside the neighbourhood. The initiative has been at the core of various academic papers and the activists are available to spread and communicate the initiative with people interested. Additionally, the aims of the initiatives the activists carried out are close to the neighbourhood needs and identity, in particular the closeness between the history of the plant and the history of families and individuals living in *Prenestino*.

The special occurrence of the human-nonhuman coalition is something particularly linked to the physical characteristics of the area that are difficult to reproduce in other contexts. Anyway, the idea to re-signify a former industrial area, with the appropriation of space and a memory, is something

possible for the majority of the abandoned ruins of the industrial era. It can be made also by valorising and protecting the urban wilderness as well as in the ex-Snia.

Another strength of the initiative concerns the multiform knowledge and the different skills that the activists mobilise, even the more technical and scientific ones (Gissara, 2018). Everybody brings their own capabilities and previous experiences to contribute to the common good.

**Is this initiative conducive to broader changes (law, institutional arrangements, long-term sustainability or community preparedness, etc.)?**

The initiative has been important in the political decision made by the Region since the Nineties to expropriate the ex-Snia area in order to create a Natural Monument, and for the creation in 2015 of the *Centro Documentazione Territoriale Maria Baccante – Archivio storico Viscosa* within the Park House. This implies that the initiative has been successful in relating with the political elites, negotiating some positive political outputs, while retaining at the same time its antagonistic and alternative role with respect to institutional politics. The process has been a real long-term initiative that is nowadays incorporated into the political, social and economic life of the neighbourhood, and the assembly is still working, asking for the expropriation of the last privately owned part of the former industrial plant. The initiative is widely recognized within Rome, and more broadly in Italy, as a successful initiative to oppose the privatisation and speculation on the industrial heritage, as well as to defend the preservation of nature and green urban spaces.

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