# The Antinomies of Realism:
# Postwar Italian Housing Projects

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The standard definition of realism rests upon the claim to represent reality. In keeping with the historical category, realist practices of the early twentieth century aspired to an aesthetic of the concrete aligned with a critical-political vocation to represent authentic social conditions. As an epistemological category, realism conflates seeing with knowing—that is, verisimilitude is substantiated by empirical knowledge and visual evidence. Much painting has been judged by its life-likeness, and certain eras of film (for example, postwar Italian neorealist cinema) aspired to the pseudo-documentary style of the witnessed chronicle. To make reality present, the realist writer employed formal techniques such as excessive visual description, especially of apparently extraneous detail, and dialogue between characters speaking in local, authentic dialects. In classic conceptions of realism, form, technique, and content are nothing unless leveraged by a political belief in representing the socio-historical conditions of the popular classes. In the 1930s, a robust exchange among German Marxist thinkers—Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, and Georg Lukács—played havoc with any direct understanding of the relation between aesthetics and politics, expressionism and realism. From that point onward, any questions about realism, about the dialectical play between form and content, or of the representable, became much more complicated.

At the centre of realism lays an epistemological dilemma. To represent reality requires that the matter of the world be structured for visual or literary communication. Communication relies on conventions, socially agreed upon codes of representation, aesthetic devices or techniques whether painterly, architectural, literary, or cinematic. If the content of realism is understood through a set of formal conventions, if a realist practice is recognized by technique, then the work produced belongs to the domain of the aesthetic and is hardly a pure expression of authentic experience—of the inchoate or raw materials of life. Once in the realm of cultural production all the conceits of representation are brought to bear. When realists claim, however naively, to present reality unfettered by aesthetic device, they hail the ideological suppositions underpinning naturalism. Roland Barthes' withering description of the existentially committed practice of the social realist writer in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) silenced the possibility of escaping ideological motivation. A realist practice that acquits itself of the shared conditions of critical reception falls out of the discourse of art and then most certainly "ceases to be an aesthetic mode of representation."[1] Literary scholar Frederic Jameson neatly summed up the realist dilemma, writing that realism "is a peculiarly unstable concept owing to its simultaneous, yet incompatible, aesthetic and epistemological claims, as the two terms of the slogan, 'representation of reality' suggest."[2] And this instability is amplified when the discussion turns from pictorial arts and the literary tradition to the question of realism in architecture.

To speak of realism in architecture is to confront the paradox inherent in the concept, whose social, political, or historical truth is made evident by the architectural project. The question appears tautological. Do an architect's intentions, the claim to represent reality accompanied by particular formal choices, or political beliefs legitimate a realist practice? If likeness to an existing referent confirms pictorial realism or the replication of proletarian dialect characterizes literary realism, then to what external reality, life-likeness, or dialect would guarantee architectural authenticity? What does the mimicry of vernacular built forms or architecture designed as if freed of stylistic pretensions represent? How is the real in architectural representation verified? If, as K. Michael Hays has argued, "the real represented by architectural realism is a real that architecture itself has produced" then architectural intentions do not much matter.[3] How is one to judge practices that obstinately reference "realities" beyond the theoretical frameworks that periodically define architecture as a discipline? Are these necessarily not realist because they stand beyond the frame of convention? And how do architects account for the unintended realities produced by the architectural project.

The relative meaning of realism and the irrepressible problems of representation were thoroughly argued in the heated cultural debates over the future of realism following the end of WWII. The rise and fall of Italian realism can be conveniently bracketed on one side by the efforts of screenwriters and film directors, the clandestine communists who in the early 1940s looked to Italian *verismo* of the nineteenth century as means to critique the bourgeois state and fascism. In this encapsulation, a seminar on the problems of realism in Italy held at the Gramsci Institute in Rome in 1959 concludes the episode.[4] A more philosophical bracketing of postwar Italian realism could equally correspond to the ideological distance that separates the reception of Jean-Paul Sartre's essay of 1947, *What is Literature?*, from Theodor Adorno's unforgiving critique of committed practice published in 1962.[5] These chronological and philosophical anchors prove useful, but only to a degree. Given that it was for the most part a debate involving the Italian Left, a timeline would need to include, among other events, the Partito Comunista Italiano's (PCI) response to the Cominform and Zhdanovian dictates of the late 1940s, Khrushchev's 1954 speech on architecture, his denunciation of Stalin's corruption and shocked response to the events in Hungary of 1956. What can be said is that from the 1940s onward, the translation of Lukács' ideas on critical realism into Italian, the later reception of Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, and Brecht's work profoundly influenced Italian realism. These texts offered concepts and analytic methods that in the early 1950s sparked fierce intellectual exchanges over the future of realism. The contours of the debate begin with charges that neorealism had devolved into naturalism and idealized depictions of the subaltern classes. There is no question of the pivotal role played in the polemics by Lukács' characterization of types.[6] Active narration, the construction of historical types in the Lukácsian sense of narrating history, was prescribed as a remedy. To narrate history had ideological consequences, for as Lukács wrote, "it is perfectly possible to describe the essentials of an historical event and yet be in the dark about the real nature of that event and of its function in the historical totality."[7] Writing in 1960, the Italian philosopher Galvano Della Volpe cautioned against the error of adhering to socialist realism. Arguing that realism was characterized by breadth and not narrowness, Della Volpe shifted the debate's focus from two supposed antithetical terms—realism defined as a dialectic between form and content versus modernism as a decadent formalism—to one single purpose: ideological critique. Echoing Brecht, he wrote that artists must question reality for the truth can be concealed in as many ways as it can be revealed.[8]

In Italy, architectural realism fell hard on the heels of the various ideologically oriented realisms that cut across cultural fields such as cinema, literature, and the visual arts. In the early 1950s realism in architecture was, for a very short time, a political and theoretical preoccupation of a handful of young architects aligned with the PCI. It remained well under the radar of the mainstream magazines. At that time, realism found its object in the realization of architectural programs with a political cause, such as working class and youth social centres (Centro Sociale) or in state-sponsored housing projects. There are a few published texts (though most remained unpublished) and certainly there is little to show in terms of built work from this period. The influence of Lukács' ideas within architectural thinking would be much delayed. In the early 1970s, nearly two decades later, the idea of literary types became one of many influences on the conception of architectural types. But Lukács' unforgiving critique of the ideology of modernism, if not its architectural forms, and his anti-avant-gardism forever marked



Fig.1
Tiburtino Housing Project, Rome (1949-54)
Project Architects: Ludovico Quaroni, Mario Ridolfi (lead architects); Mario Fiorentino, Federico Gorio, Maurizio Lanza, Piero Maria Lugli, Giulio Rinaldi, Michele Valori with Carlo Aymonino, Carlo Chiarini, Sergio Lenci, Carlo Melograni, Gian Carlo Menichetti. Many of the architects who worked on the Tiburtino project were members of the Rome-based Association for Organic Architecture (APAO).



Fig.2
The INA-Casa (Istituto Nazionale per le Assicurazione-Casa) sponsored project is located 7 km east of Rome, south of the Via Tiburtina along the Via Dei Crispolti. The architects designed 771 units for an 8.8-hectare site to house a projected population of 4,000 inhabitants. Photographs taken in 1954 show that the site's natural rolling topographic features had been leveled in preparation for building construction. In an attempt to reinstate a more natural relationship between the buildings and the street, the architects introduced raised walkways, irregular facades, and entry addresses at street level. They hoped that the design would give a more casual, less uniform, and natural appearance to the area.

Fig. 3
Lead architects Quaroni and Ridolfi provided an overall urban strategy for the site, but they delegated sections of the design development to smaller teams of architects. Their intention could be interpreted as ideological: to give the appearance of the design as having evolved spontaneously over time and without an overarching plan. In this part of the project, a staircase in front of a now-graffitied wall leads from the street to a raised walkway that skirts one side of the inner block. The entrances to the second-level units face an interior green space rather than the street.



Fig. 4
The casual front entrances along the raised walkway were intended to produce more intimate thresholds between public, semi-public, and private domestic spaces. The scale and detailing of the door stoops and awnings mimic the vernacular character and ambience of an Italian village. It was imagined that the design would better suit the future inhabitants of the state-sponsored housing project.



Fig. 5
The raised walkways, open spaces, and juxtaposition of various built forms were designed with the intention of enabling the *mise-en-scène* of urban tableaux. This area of the Tiburtino was not designed in concert with other parts of the project. Similar to other sections of the development, the architects attempted to orchestrate picturesque episodes, producing quaintly framed moments between buildings and spaces.



Fig. 6
The project is often described as focusing on the street and the pedestrians' experience of an unfolding succession of spatial episodes. The street façades are designed to appear casual or built without a predetermined design agenda. Reminiscent of farm buildings more than suburban dwellings, the awkwardly sloped roofs and detailing such as the wooden shutters were all carefully composed.



Fig. 7
The designers claimed to be influenced by the buildings of the existing Roman working class quarters and rural architecture. They invoked neorealist cinematic techniques when referring to their approach to design and choice of architectural "language" as a kind of dialect of the drawing board. The episodic, frame-by-frame narrative of space also emulated the pseudo-documentary techniques of cinematic neorealism. The buildings should appear happenstance, non-formal, and realistic, and as such, the project was interpreted as a critique of the supposed formalist and functionalist values driving the designs of modernist housing estates. Today there are few pedestrians to be found and fewer places available to park a car. The amenities, themselves few and far between, require a car.

*a generation of Italian architects schooled in the 1950s.*

The Tiburtino housing estate built on the periphery of Rome is frequently referred to as the manifesto of neorealism in architecture. The construction of the state-sponsored project predated the cultural debate over realism, and by the late 1950s it became, without any polemical intent, the cipher for neorealism in architecture. Certainly many of the young architects working on the design were members of the PCI, but they never referred to the design as realist or neorealist while it was under construction. Rather, they made arguments against a peculiar idea of modernism, calling the Tiburtino a post-functionalist design strategy. The tropes identified as neorealist include a self-conscious borrowing from vernacular dwellings, perhaps some influence from *Neue Sachlichkeit* or from what elsewhere was called the New Empiricism. Viewed disparagingly by the young architects immersed in the literary debate and versed in Lukàcs, the Tiburtino exemplified everything that was wrong with neorealism: picturesque, homely vistas, and attempts to make design appear informal, organic, and undesigned.

When in the late 1960s and early 1970s realism in architecture appears again, the political partisanship and cultural optimism that marked the earlier debate had altogether transformed. The social, political, and economic upheavals were no less turbulent. If anything they were more divisive, as the Italian Left had scattered into multiple factions and politicized violence became a new urban reality. In architecture, the realist imperative to represent socio-historical conditions, the desire to bring form and content into dialectical play, underwrote oblique and academic notions about history as the reality of architecture. Architectural type informed by various sources, including Lukács, functioned as the cornerstone for an idea of realism as architectural rationalism.

A second wave of massive-scale, state-sponsored housing projects express a rather different socio-political and architectural reality. Le Vele, a home to the Camorra crime organization and made famous by the film *Gomorrah*, the Amiata al Gallaratese by Carlo Aymonino (with Aldo Rossi), and the Corviale by Mario Fiorentino, for example, are cities unto themselves. They explode any attempt to represent anything beyond the purely architectural: the modernist housing of the Unité type with capacities for housing upwards of 5,000 people. On the periphery of Naples, Milan, and Rome, at a scale of intervention only possible after the passing of planning Law 167 in 1962, these settlements as single forms erased any residual nostaglia for authentic representation of the popular classes. What reality is expressed as a wall of housing against the forces at work in urbanization, a kilometre-long building against the piecemeal sprawl of uneven socio-economic development and the continual inability to house immigrants and the working classes?
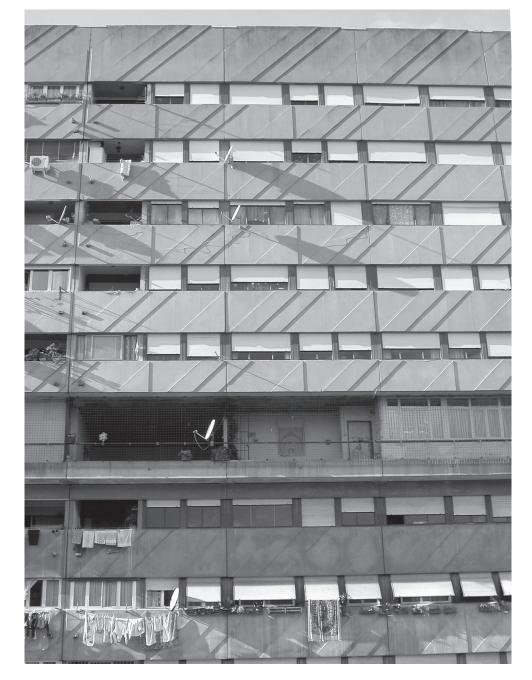
Corviale provides a fitting conclusion to the story of Italian architectural realism. The project was no longer based in claims to represent reality, as architects and critics shifted to analogy; a wall, a dam, a "monumental aphorism dropped in a place where it is impossible to live," an ideological sign that attempts to anchor the forces of urbanization between city and territory.[9] The paradox of this realism is that the chief architects of Corviale—Mario Fiorentino with Federico Gorio, Michele Valori, and Piero Lugli—had, as young architects twenty years earlier, collaborated with Ludovico Quaroni and Mario Ridolfi on the Quartiere Tiburtino.

In January 2012, Tiburtino is well-kept, and is even an architectural destination. The recently painted group of buildings stand out from what is an otherwise grim area crowded chock-a-block with mass-housing projects and, of course, automobiles. The Corviale, on the other hand, seems abandoned by all but its inhabitants. Broken elevators and smashed windows, empty public areas and supposed amenities covered in graffitti, walkways littered with dog excrement—its troubled history continues to live on. ×



Fig.1
Corviale Housing Project (1975-81; 1983-94). Construction was suspended between 1981 and 1983 due to financing problems within the IACP (Autonomous Institute for Popular Housing). Project architects: Mario Fiorentino (lead) with Federico Gorio, Piero Maria Lugli, Giulio Sterbini, Michele Valori. Almost all of the architects had worked on the Tiburtino housing project more than 20 years earlier. The passing of planning law 167 in 1962 made possible the assembly of a large tract of land able to support the gigantic scale of building.



Fig.2
The five architects were asked to develop a scheme for a housing project located on a site just inside the city boundary on the periphery of Rome. The architectural team proposed a unitary intervention, an unvarying volume that would appear as a wall of inhabitation toward the city. At the level of architectural idea, the project depicts an architectural shift from narrative (as in the Tiburtino, for example) to analogy as explanation for built form. The initial conception had the housing component face the city side and the support services face the countryside.

Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 158.
2. Ibid.
3. K. Michael Hays, *Architecture Theory since 1968* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 254.
4. "Problemi del realismo in Italia," *Il Contemporaneo* 11 (February-March, 1959): 3-59; participants included Carlo Salinari, philosophers Galvano Della Volpe and Lucio Colletti, film critics Antonello Trombadori and Umberto Barbaro, and Rossana Rossanda, Raffaele De Grada, Mario De Micheli, Mario Alicata, Valentino Gerratana, architects Carlo Aymonino, Franco Berlanda, Carlo Melograni, among others.
5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947); and Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," in *Aesthetics and Politics: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukács*, ed. Fredric Jameson (London: Verso, 1977), 177-195.
6. See Antonio Banfi, "A proposito di Lukács e del realismo in arte," *Realismo* 18 (January-February, 1954): 6; and Franco Fortini, "Lukács in Italia," *Officina* 3 (1959): 77-101.
7. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. R. Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 12.
8. Galvano Della Volpe, "Engels, Lenin, and the Poetic of Socialist Realism," in *Critique of Taste*, trans. Michael Caesar (London, New York: Verso, 1991), 239.
9. Manfredo Tafuri, "Diga insicura / Sub tegmine fagi..." *Domus* 617 (May 1981): 22-26.

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Fig.3
The elevators frequently malfunctioned and, along with the entryways, were often targeted by vandals. By late 1983, nearly 700 families were illegally occupying the building. The squatters settled into the fourth floor of the main building, which had originally been designed to support boutiques for artisan products, offices and commercial activities. This design strategy emulated the modern housing typology of the Unité d'Habitation, designed by Le Corbusier in the early 1950s.



Fig.4
Security was a problem. Underemployment was a big problem. The enormous corridors were unprotected from vagrants, vandals, and the weather. The inhabitants felt abandoned by authorities, isolated in their units, and disconnected from the life of the city. The root of the problem stemmed from the enormity of the structure and the presumed self-sufficiency and autonomy of the housing complex.



Fig.6
In built form, there were three aspects to the assembly. The main building is 10 stories in height and 1 km in length. The plan proposed units for 6,300 inhabitants, 5 grand public spaces or parks, three groups of services, a comprehensive school from kindergarten to middle school, commercial necessities, and excellent vehicular circulation through a series of ring roads. But it turned out that there were approximately 10,000 people living in 1200 apartments at any given time, not including the ever-present population of squatters. Although numerous attempts were made by the Carabinieri to evict them, they would return each time to take over different parts of the building and site, including the park.



Fig.5
The public spaces were unkempt and abused. Playgrounds, an outdoor theatre space, a park, and other public amenities were isolated from the main buildings and out of sight from the ring road and walkways, and thus rarely used.





Fig.7
In the 1970s, Mario Fiorentino argued that Corviale represented a bridgehead between the city and the countryside beyond, and as a gigantic building it would present a complex architectural reality in relation to the city. Today, it represents a rather different complex relation between utopian architectural thinking and form, public housing policy and what it means to inhabit.

Fig.8
The historian Manfredo Tafuri wrote that the architects' ability to persuade the state authorities and the IACP of the reasonableness of the proposal was perhaps the most astounding aspect of the accomplishment. And more poetically, Tafuri claimed that Corviale was not a model for housing but a sign of poverty, as a place where it was impossible "to live"—the building stood as a tragic monument. Designed in the 1970s as a promise for the future of the city and its inhabitants, it soon stood as the sign of an architecture that had little chance of influencing future developments. (Manfredo Tafuri, "Diga insicura/sub tegmine fagi..." Domus 617 (May 1981): 22-26.)