The standard definition of realism rests upon the claim to represent reality. In keeping with the historical category, realist practitioners 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—what is, veristic identity 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 experiences—of the incumbent or raw materiality of human 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 presuppositions of modern naturalism. Roland Barthes’ withering description of the existentially committed practice of watching Ozu’s Zero (1959) silenced the possibility of escaping ideological motivation. A realist practice that acquires itself of the shared felicities of concrete representation 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.1 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 referent is historical, or technical, 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 confers pictorial realism or the evocation of prehistoric dialect characterizes literary realism, then to what external reality, life-likeness, or dialect would guarantee architectural authenticity? What does the masonry of vernacular built forms or architectural design as it freed of stylistic pretensions represent? How is the role in architectural representation versus content? As K. Michael Hars has argued, ‘the real represented by architectural realism is a role that architecture itself has produced’ then architectural intentions do not much matter. How is one to judge practices that ostensibly refer ‘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 WWI. The rise and fall of Italian realism can be conveniently bracketed on one side by the efforts of scenemakers and film directors, the clandestine communists who in the early 1940s looked to Italian notions 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.2 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 Theodore Adorno’s ongoing critique of committed practice published in 1962.3 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 Titoist dictates of the late 1940s, Rilke’s 1943 speech on architecture, the denunciation of Stalin’s corruption and shock work to the events in Hungary of 1956. What can be said is that from the 1930s 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 tests offered concepts and analytic methods that in the early 1950s sparked force intellectual exchanges over the future of realism. The contours of the debate begins with charges that realism 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.4 Active narratives, 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 its function in the historical totalities.”5 Writing in 1960, the Italian philosopher Gabano Dell’Upe cautioned against the error of adhering to socialist realism. Arguing that realism was characterized by breadth and not narrowness, Dell’Upe shifted the debate’s focus from two opposed 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.

In Italy, architectural realism fell hard on the heels of the various ideologically oriented realities 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 (Centri Sociali) 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 the rise and fall of Italian realism.
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. This intentional decision 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.

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.

The raised walkways, open spaces, and juxtaposition of various built forms were designed with the intention of reenacting the multi-use and multi-occupancy characteristics of the area of the Tiburtino that was not designed in concert with other parts of the project. In this sense, the architects attempted to orchestrate picturesque episodes, producing quaintly framed moments between buildings and spaces.

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 predates 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 trope identified as neorealism include a self-conscious borrowing from vernacular dwellings, perhaps some influence from Neave Brown's work or from what elsewhere was called the New Empiricism. Viewed disparagingly by the young architects immersed in the literary debate and vested in Lukács, the Tiburtino exemplified everything that was wrong with neorealism: picturesque, homely vistas, and attempts to make design appear informal, organic, and undesignable.

When in the late 1960s and early 1970s realism in architecture appears again, the political participation 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 direous, 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, underwent 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 Camera crime organization and made famous by the film Gomorrha, the Anziani (in Gallafate by Carlo Aymonino, and also 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 nostalgia 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 analog, 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.1 The paradox of this realism is that the chief architects of Corviale—Mario Fiorentino with Federico Gorio, Michele Valori, and Piero Logan—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 from what is an otherwise grim area crowded check-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 nestagia for authentic representation of the popular classes. What reality is expressed as a wall of inhabitation toward the city. At the level of architectural idea, the project departs from architectural ideas from earlier on the Tiburtino. For example, the project avoids idealization for both form. The mass-housing project precludes a unified form of the city and the support aves the city side and the support aves the countryside.
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. 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. 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.

Fig. 7

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