

Don't Tear Down the Corviale!

Modernism, Architecture, the City, and Society

Dan McTavish

ARCH 503 Scrutinizing Buildings



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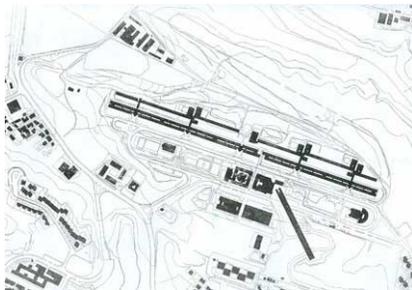
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"The Corviale building outside Rome is a social housing block that exemplifies the established Corbusian tradition of treating human beings as battery chickens. It was built during 1972-1982 as a single one-kilometer-long building. It is now estimated to house 6,000 people. Apologists who are nostalgic of Soviet-era social experiments continue to defend its paradigmatic modernist design on the grounds that every resident is EQUALLY oppressed in this inhuman environment, an ideal consistent with totalitarian notions of social equality."¹

Nikos Salingaros

"Tear Down the Corviale! New Urbanism Comes to Rome"



1 Plan of Corviale



2 2010 plan for Corviale proposed by Ettore Maria Mazzola

The criticisms that are often leveled at modernist, publicly funded housing projects, particularly of those built after the Second World War such as Unite d'Habitation (Marseille 1947-1952, Le Corbusier), Robin Hood Gardens (London, 1966-1972, Alison and Peter Smithson), Bijlmermeer (Amsterdam 1966-1975, Department of Urban Development), and Corviale, (Rome, 1973-1981, Mario Fiorentino et al) are many. Critics, such as Nikos Salingaros, claim the projects are oppressive and inhuman environments conceptualized in the minds of a single ego, the Architect, in service of an external ideology stemming from the *Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne* and *The Athens Charter*, of which the aforementioned projects all participated in either directly or indirectly. Critics argue that these environments in turn breed violence and criminality all as a result of the form of the architecture.² While the critics assertion that architectural form carries with it such agency are flattering to architects (who knew that architecture could carry such power), the reality is that there are much larger social structural

¹ (Salingaros n.d.)

² (Dalrymple n.d.)

issues which contribute to the problems of these modernist housing projects, far from the architecture itself. The housing projects of the post-war period were most often constructed for an already marginalized group of people, which continued to be marginalized after the completion of the project. This is not the fault of the architect, or of the architecture.

Stating that these housing projects are all 'failures' is problematic. Firstly, the criticisms are general and overly dismissive, not pointing to specifics to substantiate their claims against the architecture. Secondly, thirty years have passed in the case of Corviale, and it is home to over 6000 people, as Salingaros cites, which seems reveal that it cannot be as bad as it is made out to be. At the least, critics fail to recognize what is working in the projects, at the extreme they border on racist or classist, marginalizing an already disparaged group of people.

“Even if we believe that the form and structure of post-war high-rise districts has contributed to the marginalization and social degeneration of an already vulnerable group of residents, it will not help them if we dismiss our predecessors' mistakes with a sweeping gesture. One of the fundamental values of urban development which has a hard time getting through to government officials and designers, but is prevalent among sociologists, social geographers and historians, is that the city is fundamentally unpredictable. At some time designers and government officials, caught up in self-imposed restriction on their powers of imagination powers, may erect a structure, build a symbol or realize a utopia. After a few generations their edifice will, by definition, be used and lived quite differently, by people whose existence they could not possibly predict. In the circles of city authorities and planners this is interpreted as the 'failure' of the urban project.”³

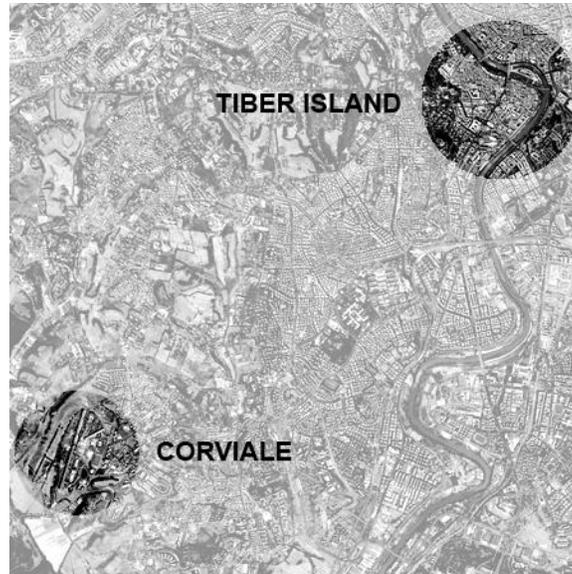
Wouter Vanstiphout

“It's The Architects Fault!”

Through the examination of the context in which Corviale developed, the ideas that shaped it, and the project as it stands thirty years later, the aim is to complicate the binary reading of project as 'successful' or as a 'failure.' Far from the oppressive environment that Salingaros puts forward, Corviale is an example of an architecture where the architect, Mario Fiorentino, strove to reimagine the city and the ways in which we live together as emergent and not prescriptive. Today there is still much that Corviale can reveal about the efficacy of architecture and where it is best focused, and the relationship of architecture to the city.

³ (Vanstiphout 2010)

Corviale Defined



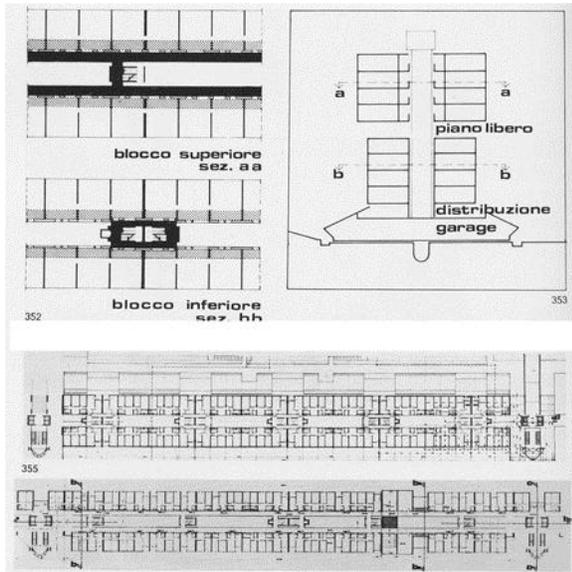
3 Location of Corviale

Corviale is located outside of the historic city center in the periphery of Rome along the via Portuense. The project was started in 1973 and was completed in 1981 for the state under the management of the Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari (IACP). Corviale was designed by architect Mario Fiorentino as part of Rome's 1964 regional plan to alleviate the demand for new housing, and the pressures of crowding in the central city core.⁴ It was conceived as a community for eight thousand people contained in around sixteen hundred, two to three bedroom dwellings. The project consists of three residential types; a row of maisonettes in four storeys, a five to seven storey building containing two bedroom units, and the defining element of the project, a one kilometer long eleven storey slab building containing one thousand dwellings. As well the project also included parking, shopping, a kindergarten, and a church as part of its programme.

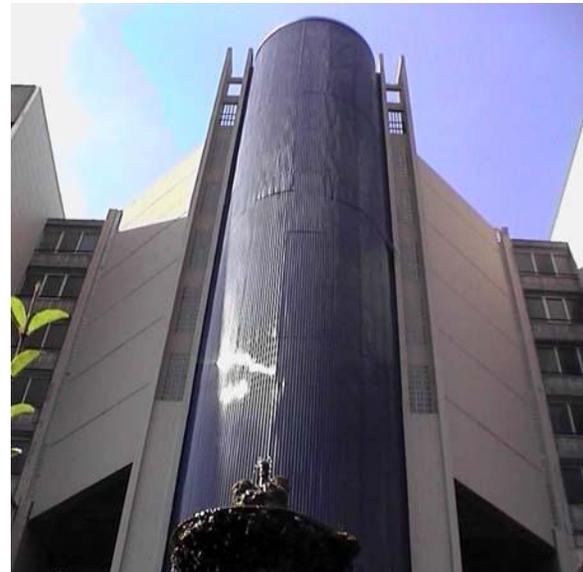
The one kilometer slab building is actually two slabs placed side by side creating a central void to bring light into the lower levels. Adjacent to the opening is a corridor on both sides serving the residential units. The length of the building is broken into five sections by vertical circulation elements that break down the scale of the building and creates identifiable entry points to specific segments. Care is taken to emphasize the importance of these shared elements, with the cores articulated in ceramics tiles. When one exits at their floor, they arrive in a common space with "concrete benches...that are reminiscent of

⁴ (Housing Prototypes n.d.)

Hermand Hertsberg's work."⁵ The floors are paved in travertine, which tapers out as one progresses to the more domesticated corridor accessing the units, which is paved in brown tile. The circulation plays a significant role in the project. Here there is a move away from the functional city of the Athens Charter.



4 Plans and Section of Main Slab



5 Vertical Circulation

The influence of Alison and Peter Smithson on the attitude towards circulation is clear, especially when looking at their competition entry for the Golden Lane housing estate in 1952. Peter Smithson writes,

“Our aim is to create a true street-in-the-air, each ‘street’ having a large number of people dependent on it for access, and in addition some streets are to be thoroughfares – that is, leading to places – so that they will each acquire special characteristics – be it identified in fact. Each part of each street-in-the-air will have sufficient people accessed from it for it to become a social entity and be within reach of a much larger number at the same level...Thoroughfares can house small shops, post-boxes, telephone kiosks, etc. – the flat block disappears and vertical living becomes a reality. The refuse chute takes the place of the village pump.”⁶

The fourth floor of the slab building was seen as exemplar of a thoroughfare as Peter Smithson describes. The floor is free from dwelling units and was designated the ‘piano libero’ where shops, a kindergarden, a school, a work shop, and a council room are located. However, as early as 1989, eight years after the completion of the project, the ‘piano libero’ remained vacant of shops and the social

⁵ (van Rooy 2004) 178

⁶ (Smithson and Smithson 2001) 86

amenities imagined at the inception of the project. What took their place were squatters which re-appropriated the floor and constructed new dwellings.

*“The squatters created their own realm on the floor that was originally intended to be the central social meeting place for all the inhabitants of Corviale. For the last few years, their example has been followed in the remaining public areas of the complex. The kindergarten and the school are now being used as a boxing gym, the workshop for a theater, the council for the residents of Corviale, and a meeting place for the elderly.”*⁷

The fact that the fourth floor is not occupied as intended is often a point of criticism. Thomas Angotti writes,

*“The architect deprived the tenants of commercial space by planning an unusual commercial spine on the [fourth] floor, against all market principles, which summarily failed and closed down. Today the entire [fourth] floor is padlocked. As with all monumental design, the architect sought to create an environment around his building instead of around the daily lives and historic relations among people.”*⁸

The architect did not deprive the tenants of commercial space - the location of the project, which was designated by the ICAP deprived the tenants. While the location off of the ground floor might not have been ideal, the lack of commercial space must be seen at a larger regional scale and not just within the building at the time of its completion. However, the lack of commercial space on the fourth floor bred something much more interesting arguably and something much more in line with how a city may develop and emerge. The over generalization of all monumental design, while not supported with evidence, does raise an interesting point to push back on. Was Corviale really not created around the daily lives and historic relation among people? Generally, what are the historic relations among people, and from whose point of view? Specifically, what are the relationships among people when Corviale is being designed and constructed? An examination of Italian reconstruction after the Second World War provides context to the motivations of Mario Fiorentino to design this explicitly social architecture.

Italian Reconstruction, Hot Autumn and Housing Policy

*“Among the most flagrant structural imbalances which have emerged during Italy’s rapid transformation process was the inadequate allocation of resources to social expenditure, for the satisfaction of such collective needs as housing, health, transport and education services, which had grown substantially with the large shifts of population and rapid urbanization.”*⁹

⁷ (van Rooy 2004) 181

⁸ (Angotti 1993) 202

⁹ (Podbielski 1974) 155



6 Baracche Dell'Acquedotto Felice, Franco Pinna, 1956

During the Second World War nearly one million dwellings were destroyed. In the immediate post-war period there was a large shift in population from the rural areas of the country to the city. These two factors resulted in high demand for housing. Private development and speculation took hold of the situation exploiting the demand, promoting rapid urbanization. The dwellings, however, were often expensive and out of reach for the people that needed them the most.¹⁰ Large portions of an already disparaged working class population were pushed to the periphery. In the early years of reconstruction amazing economic growth was experienced, however it was at the expense of a working class. Coupled with a lack of affordable housing was an unemployment rate of 9% in 1951¹¹. In 1949 l'Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni-Casa (INA-Casa) was created to administer and oversee funds for building new residential units allocated from l'Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni. . The construction of residential housing was seen as a way of not only providing much needed housing but as a way to put the country back to work in two seven year phases, the first from 1949 to 1956 and from 1956 to 1963. The INA-Casa Plan saw the construction of more than 350,000 units.¹²

Coinciding with the end of the INA-Casa plan, was the end of the 'economic miracle;' the period of economic upturn and growth from the later 1950s to the early 1960s.¹³ With this recession came a reduction in public social investments particularly in housing. Though outside the scope of this paper, the economic situation in post-war Italy is worth noting because of its link to the resulting social frustrations. Reforms were attempted to promote growth and address many of the problems that were presenting

¹⁰ (Podbielski 1974) 156

¹¹ (Podbielski 1974) 18

¹² (Pilat 2009) xiii

¹³ (Podbielski 1974) 15

themselves, but the problems seem to be deeper than just economic. At this moment two important streams were developing that are important in the story of Corviale. The first development was the general frustration felt by the working class with the government and its institutions, and its manifestation in a series of strikes and riots. The second, being important housing reform that was passed at the end of INA-Casa's life between April 1962 and October 1971.

*"They protest against the excessive inequality of the distribution of wealth between social classes, economic categories and religion, and the shocking contrast between pockets of opulence and misery. Other causes of tension are the large pay differentials between different categories of workers and employees, which are neither justified by differences in qualifications or demand-supply conditions not mitigated by progressive taxation. All these claims reflect a profound social crisis and a general collapse of confidence in the functioning of existing institutions."*¹⁴



7 Milan General Strike 1969

In 1969 the tensions between the social classes became visible in Italy, in a series of strikes and protest in which the Trade Union movement was at the center. This would come to be known as Hot Autumn. The clashes, as Podbielski writes, reflected a profound social crisis, with a marginalized working class demanding better living conditions and better wages. Though presented here in an overly simplistic way, the strikes and protests of 1969, four years before the start of construction on Corviale, are important in understanding the context in which the project emerges. It is at a time when people come together to fight for their common good and for what is just. There is optimism in the collective, and in its

¹⁴ (Podbielski 1974) 42

ability to intervene in the social-political system. It is this optimism in the collective that is seen in Corviale. Through Corviale, Mario Fiorentino attempted a model where collective living was reimagined, not imposed. It shared the optimism in the collective power of individuals to shape the world around them. Corviale was imagined as a social condenser, where a life in the building was more than merely the sum of its constituents. Through collective living more complex relationships were imagined to develop through the negotiation of collective facilities, services and urban routes, presenting the building as essentially a fragment of the city in (not so) miniature. Unfortunately for the project, by the time that it was completed that sense of optimism had fled. Professor Piero Ostillo Rossi writes,

“The Corviale is, in fact, a residential model planned in a time when it seemed possible to develop the social relationships between people to the extreme and to answer those needs which were manifested in collective terms: the Corviale was realised on the basis of shared, not an imposed, programme. It was certainly a utopia, but it raised high hopes. At the beginning of the 1980s, however, the Roman people were no longer leaving their houses. They were immersed in what we now call the ‘Years of Lead,’ years in which widespread violence and political terrorism had left deep scars on our society (Aldo Moro had been kidnapped and killed in 1978, the Bologna station bombing had taken place in 1980). Those people who should have given life to a diverse community of solidarity stayed locked inside their apartments, they were scared, they did not trust one another. The worst conditions in which to experiment a utopia.”¹⁵

The demands for better housing were met with a series of reforms that had already begun as early as 1962 in response to the emerging economic situation, and 1971. Corviale emerges out of these reforms. The specifics of the reforms, though interesting, are not required here, only that similar to INA-Casa, the government established the need for more housing to meet demand, and that a new institution, the IACP, was created to oversee the construction and subsequent management of the projects. Instead of the projects being controlled at the level of the state, as with INA-Casa, the individual regions and communes to develop housing plans and acquire land. This often led to a lack of funding, as with Corviale, and the under or complete lack of management of its properties. The political tides also changed in the 1980s and the instruments for low income rent subsidies and the allocation of public housing were abandoned. As Corviale was nearing completion still covered in scaffolding, families were already moving in. The elevators did not work and electricity and gas cut out regularly. The allocation of units was inefficient, and Corviale remained empty, with only the lowest income families moving in or squatting.

Mario Fiorentino...knew full well that the success of this type of project depends on many factors. ‘If one wants to design real neighborhoods instead of dormitory cities, it is necessary to invest considerable sums of public money in public services, and to acknowledge that running a project like this requires good

¹⁵ (Rossi 2009) 91

management and the availability of a trained staff ...and makes it necessary to conceive and program these aspects as being as important as the architectural design.”¹⁶

This reveals two things. Firstly, that the social structures of Italy in the post-war period were highly problematic and marginalizing. While there were attempts to deal with the problems of housing and the poor standard of living experienced by many working class families, the structural problems were often much deeper and much more institutionalized. The perceived ‘failure’ of Corviale, and many other post-war housing estates, is not resultant from the architecture, but a result of much large social-political issues, and what can be seen as the failure of the State to adequately address the problems of the population.



8 Cliche Sous Bois near Paris, where the 2005 riots took place



9 2005 Riots in Paris over the death of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traore

Secondly, Corviale is a project situated deeply in its context. To discount the social and political atmospheres of post war Italy is to totally ignore the motivations that were influencing the design, as well as to ignore the complex social and political structures that existed long before and that will continue to exist long after Corviale was complete. It also fails to recognize these as being in flux over time. The social structural problems in Italy, and generally, are much more complicated and multi-tiered than what architecture can address. The efficacy of architecture and planning does not lie in its ability to radically reshape or overcome structural problems directly. People that are marginalized will continue to be marginalized regardless of the architecture. Struggles between the rich and the poor will continue to happen. Where architecture's efficacy lies is in its ability to organize shape and suggest ways of living

¹⁶ (van Rooy 2004) 179

together. Like in the protests of Hot Autumn, it is the individual in their relationship to the collective where changes to the system can come from. Architecture is not significant in and of itself, but for how it allows us to relate to one another, and subsequently to the world at large. Corviale is a project in this spirit, acting as an armature for relationships to emerge between individuals and that these collective relationships in turn can influence the broader social structures in Italian society.

Architecture as Armature

*"If future inhabitants expect to find a paternalistic structure of the type where everything is taken care of and they do not have to invest anything themselves, Corviale is destined to fail, because it is quite clear that it cannot be managed in a paternalistic way."*¹⁷

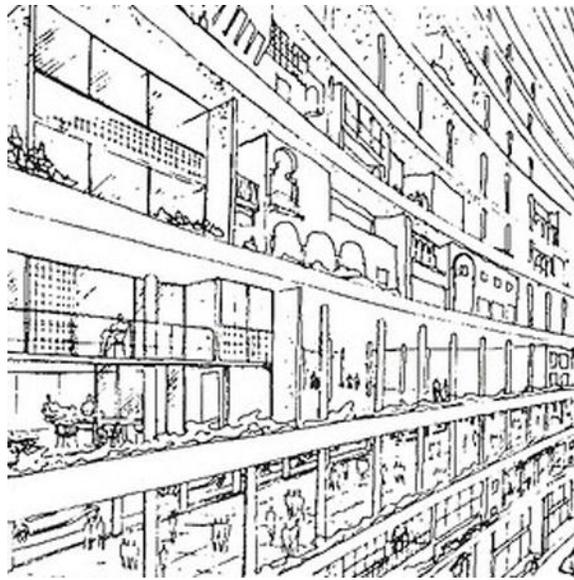
Mario Fiorentino 1982

Corviale was designed as a frame in which the individual could appropriate the project through its circulatory systems, maintenance, re-appropriation of and definition of public shared spaces. Against the totalitarian notion of the collective, which is seen as one mass, in Corviale, the collective was seen as the agglomeration of individuals and the relationships that emerge between them. This idea is closely associated with the idea of autonomy where the individual is given priority, and that through the relation of individuals that share have like principles the collective emerges.¹⁸ The physical structure of Corviale does not impose a specific relationship among its residents through its form, but rather acts as a frame with which differences can emerge. The fourth floor, as stated before, is the most obvious example of an active participation in the ongoing refine of the building, as well as the space of the 'street' immediately outside of the units, taking on the quality and diversity that one expects to find on a traditional street. In Corviale the end of construction does not signal the completion of the project, rather its beginning.

¹⁷ (van Rooy 2004) 177

¹⁸ Autonomy, n.

b. Philos. In Kantian philosophy: the freedom of will which enables a person to adopt the rational principles of moral law (rather than personal desire or feeling) as the prerequisite for his or her actions; the capacity of reason for moral self-determination. Oxford English Dictionary



10 Projet 'A', Fort l'Empereur, 1931 Algiers, Le Corbusier

“...on one hand a massive, even monumental, supporting frame; on the other, various arrangements of habitable containers beyond the control of the architect.”¹⁹

The image of Le Corbusier's 1931 drawing for scheme 'A' for Fort l'Empereur in Algiers, reveals an attitude towards architecture that would be taken up in Unite d'Habitation, and influence many post-war projects, Corviale being one, as well as Alison and Peter Smithson's un-built Golden Lane proposal and its subsequent built manifestation as the Robin Hood Gardens housing estate. Presented in the image is an architecture where pedestrian streets, next to vehicles granted, appear elevated above the ground. Underneath and above there are what appear to be residential units; however, the specific form of the dwellings that are within the slabs varies, with some appearing to be modern and other in a Mediterranean style. What is important is the underlying structure, the infrastructural quality of the project.²⁰ Here the specifics of the project are not what is important, rather that the architect's role is establishing a frame within which the specifics and the relationships that follow between the residents emerge out of living within and through the project. Peter Smithson writes on Robin Hood Gardens,

¹⁹ (Banham 1976) 8

²⁰ infrastructure, n.

A collective term for the subordinate parts of an undertaking; substructure, foundation; *spec.* the permanent installations forming a basis for military operations, as airfields, naval bases, training establishments, etc. Oxford English Dictionary



11 Robin Hood Gardens, London, 1966-1972, Alison and Peter Smithson

“This building for the socialist dream – which is something different from simply complying with a programme written by the socialist state – was for us a Roman activity and Roman at many levels:

...in that it was built for an elaborate system of government and one with its own permanent bureaucracy;

...in that it takes stand alongside the heroism of what has been made before – the port, the road;

...in that it is as heroic as supplying a Romanised city with water: whether one sees this service as dramatic and obvious as an aqueduct or as secret and craftsmanly as the underground conduit;

...in that one has to deal with the problem of repetition;

...in that it is a bold statement working with land forms;

...in that it provides a place for the anonymous client;

...in that I wants to be universal, greater than our little state – related to a greater law.²¹

Beyond just a way to allow various aesthetics to emerge, the projects allow the individual to be present, in the building physically, but also in a process where actually the clients are not present in the decisions that are being made about the building. It is the architect’s duty to give voice to the constituents that are not present at the meeting tables, which is particularly the case in social housing projects where the residents are present. This does not mean that they should be consulted in a community consensus type design, where all potential friction is eliminated. The design of an infrastructure allows conflicts and

²¹ (Smithson and Smithson 2001) 296

subsequent negotiations to take place as a result of the individuals, and allow for the project to change over time; friction, and roughness are favoured over apparent smoothness.

“Fiorentino warned the inhabitants not to count on help from the traditional paternalistic structures and institutions. They were expected to invest time and energy in making the project a success. And so they did. They literally repossessed the building... Throughout the years, the people living in Corviale have established a special relation with the ‘monster; and they oppose the negative evaluation of this experimental complex. Nevertheless, they would like nothing better than the implementation of the original concept, which would guarantee more security and better opportunities for organizing all kinds of activities.”²²

While Fiorentino warns the inhabitants to take ownership in the project to make it successful, the physical structure of the building can only go so far. Equally implicated in the statement, though not explicitly, is the ICAP. When opened, the elevators were not installed, and gas and electricity cut out frequently, and the nearest bus station was three kilometers away, despite the low car ownership by the residents.^{23 24} Today the closest public transportation access is just over half a kilometer away, at the intersection of Via della Casetta Mattei and Via di Corviale. While investments have been made, like all buildings, general maintenance is required, and is part of the responsibility of the owner. While Corviale acts as a frame for the relationships amongst its residents to emerge, it is also a state financed social housing project for an often marginalized group of people. The investment in such an infrastructure cannot be seen in the short term. More than just a way to provide a qualitative improvement in dwelling numbers and to put people back to work in a recessed economy; it requires long term commitment and subsequently long term funding, to undertake general maintenance on the building, outside of what the residents can do.²⁵ This is not paternalistic, rather the state sharing in the responsibility of the individuals as one of many players.

²² (van Rooy 2004) 181

²³ (van Rooy 2004) 179

²⁴ (Angotti 1993) 202

²⁵ In a recent Building Digest article, Tim Archer, deputy leader of the Tory group, accused the Tower Hamlets Council that manages Robin Hood Gardens of failing to undertake required maintenance in an attempt to drive residents out to make way for new development of the land. Building Digest also polled the residents, and despite myths to the contrary, 80% of the residents would like to remain in Robin Hood Gardens, particularly if upgrades to the project were performed...not surprisingly after nearly 40 years. <http://m.bdonline.co.uk/news/council-%E2%80%98running-down%E2%80%99-robin-hood-gardens/3149459.article>

Projections

The efficacy of architecture, and specifically Corviale, lies not in its ability to change social structures directly, but to provide a way that people can relate to one another in space, and allow for the collective to emerge. This new collective then has the ability to make its voice heard and attempt to change the social structures around them. Regardless of the form that the architecture takes, the structural barriers, and marginalization of peoples, will continue, be it in Corviale or in any of the New Urbanist schemes touted around by Nikos Salingaros. What architects can aim for, and should aim for, is to provide a structure, physically and conceptually, for the occupants to actively participate within. It is not the architect's fault. The ills that affect many of these groups that are within social housing generally, drugs, criminality, etc., result from a frustration with the social, political, and economic systems around them. The 2005 riots in Paris were not caused by Le Corbusier, and to think so one fails to see the bigger problems afflicting our society globally.



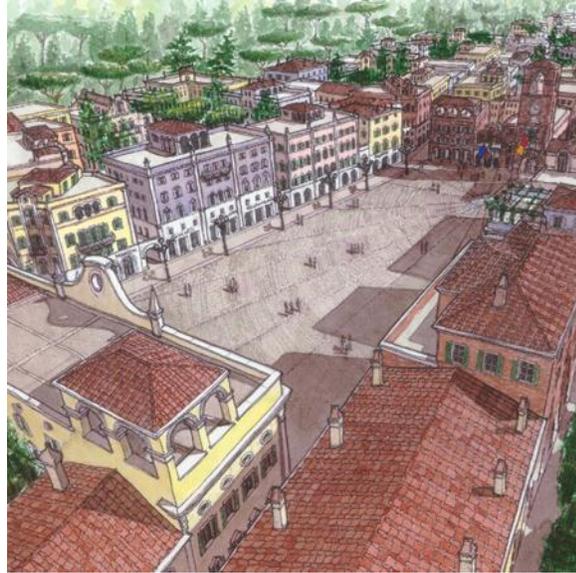
12 Robin Hood Gardens inner courtyard



13 Swan Housing and Countryside Properties proposal for Robin Hood Gardens



14 Hallway in Corviale



15 2010 plan for Corviale proposed by Ettore Maria Mazzola

Though, like all projects, Corviale succeeds in some things, while not achieving its full potential in others. While the building itself contains a richness of life and grit not found in other peripheral communities, the surrounding ground plan is stark. If the project had been completed to the design of Fiorrention and more funding provided, the elements so often cut from budgets, yet so critical to the project, may have been included. This is however just speculation. As designers we are not often in control of setting the budget, particularly with State funded projects, which demands of us the ability and dexterity to anticipate a lack of funding and maintenance and plan for those inevitabilities over time. This is a short coming of Corviale. Fiorentino anticipated and warned the residents of Corviale to invest in the project; what he did not anticipate was the withdrawal of the State from its responsibilities.²⁶

What Corviale reveals is attitude towards architecture that is fundamentally social, and questions how we can relate to one another. Fiorention's role was not to prescribe an outcome, but rather set up an infrastructure from within which the outcome is never fixed and constantly changing. It also reveals, along with many other projects of the period, one answer to the question of how we can live collectively. Today we are still dealing with the same problems. The solution has been individual suburban homes, and high rise point towers. Here the individuals are treated all the same, and your best chance for expression as an individual is the selection of the interior finishes of your unit, every corridor the same. It is here where every resident is equally oppressed, as Salingaros says. More than a failure, Corviale confronts us with the problems of our current society, and suggests ways of viewing architecture, its efficacy, and provides a type for undertaking building where the collective and thus the city are emergent.²⁷

²⁶ Through not explored here, failure in the technical sense is interesting in relation to management and maintenance of a project. See Failed Architecture #6: Concrete Failures. <http://failedarchitecture.com/>

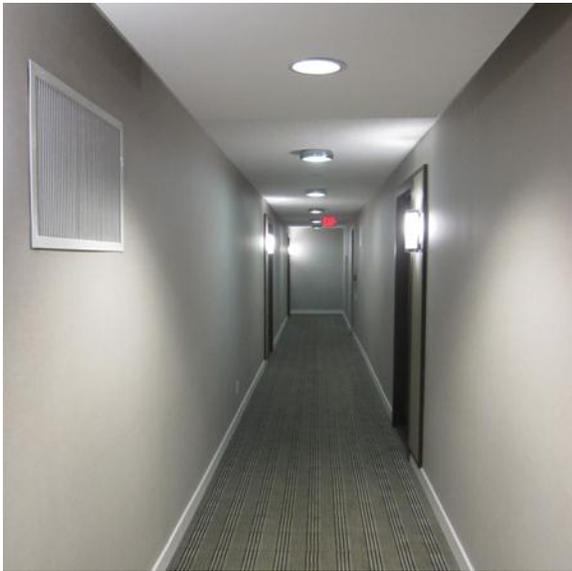
²⁷ Type here is in reference to Adrian Forty, where it is defined as the idea outside of the specific form of the object. This is opposed to a model, which is the idea formalized.



16 iLoft Condo floor 7, Toronto, Ontario



17 Corviale floor 7, Rome, Italy



18 iLoft Condo floor 9, Toronto, Ontario



19 Corviale floor 9, Rome, Italy

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Figures

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