



Mario Fiorentino et al., *Corviale*, Rome, Italy, 1972-84. Façades facing Rome. © Filippo Lorenzi, 2016.

Reloaded *Corviale*, a City with a Single Building (1973–84) Mario Fiorentino Architect, Rome

BY ROSALIA VITTORINI

The *Corviale* is one of the most controversial pieces of 20th century Roman architecture, having been simultaneously debated, demonized, mythologized, loved and hated. The architecture is unquestionably extraordinary, and not only for its size. The complex, comprised of public housing and services for more than 8,000 residents, was designed between 1972 and 1974 by Mario Fiorentino, along with a large group of associates, and was built in the following ten years. As a result of deterioration due to its incompleteness, lack of maintenance, continuous squatting and difficulties for diverse residents to coexist, the *Corviale* has, for years, represented the manifesto of disastrous public housing policies in Italy.

The Project

The *Piano di zona n. 61 Corviale* was one of numerous *Piani di Edilizia Economica Popolare* (PEEP) [Plans for Affordable Social Housing] organized by the City of Rome in order to identify new areas for the expansion of the city in accordance with Law No. 167 of 1962,¹ which aimed to combat land speculation. The *Corviale* is located along via Portuense in an area of approximately 605,000m² of unparalleled beauty, in the original and well-preserved landscape of the Roman countryside. It was supported by the IACP, *Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari* [Independent Institute for Social Housing] and by GESCAL, the *Gestione Case per i Lavoratori* [Housing Management for Workers], which had planned, respectively, social housing for 6,900 residents and cooperative housing for 1,600.

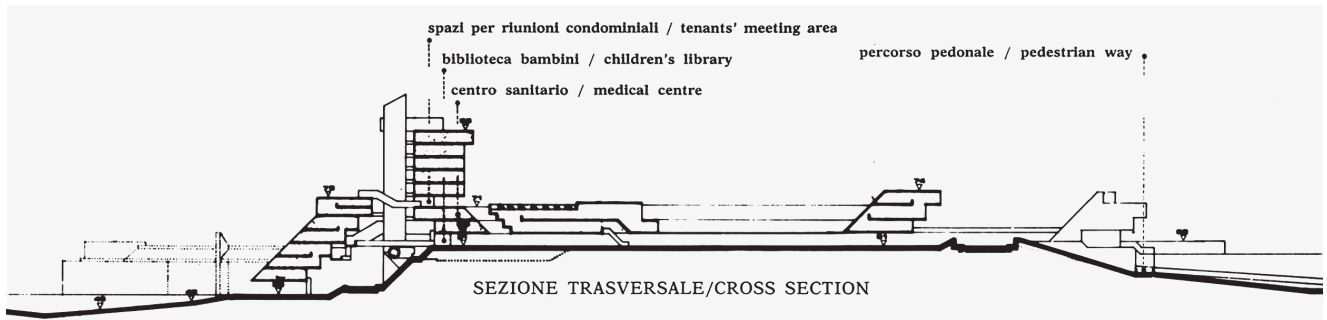
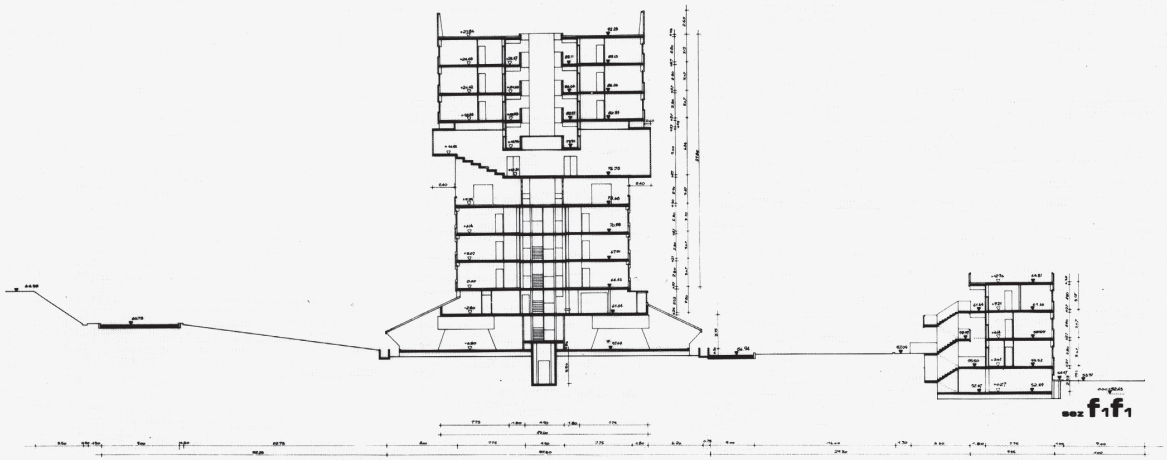
Mario Fiorentino, the general coordinator, set up a highly uniform project that compelled all designers to programmatically renounce individual expression in order to work towards a common goal.² The urban plan is organized around a sort of “city-building”, approximately 1km long in an elevated position (the crest of a hill with southeast-northwest orientation). The city-building is a complex system consisting of two parallel blocks, each with apartments ranging from 4 to 7 rooms, flanked by public services. The first building, which faces Rome, extends over 11 floors and is subdivided into 5 blocks, each with a stairwell that serves as the main vertical connection and which projects outwards over 5 different *piazze*, identifiable as nodal points by 5 different sculptures.³ It is characterized by an empty floor — the fourth or fifth — intended for communal facilities. This floor, which is also visible due to symmetrical projecting façades, separates the lower ones from the upper ones (accessed by balconies). The apartments are accessed using internal stairs

(lower floors) and balconies (upper floors). The cross-section repeats, uninterrupted, throughout the entire length of the building. The only variance is an addition of one floor where there is a drop in the topography, and the insertion, for each stairwell, of a meeting area for residents between the 4th and 5th floors. The second building, overlooking the countryside, is a smaller 2-story residential complex flanked by four different service-related centers: kindergarten, theater, day care and shops. This building runs parallel to the first and is connected to it by a series of footbridges, corresponding to the 5 main stairwells and crossing the access road leading to the garages, which are located in the basement. Along the side facing the city, in a sort of linear park, one finds all of the services for the neighborhood: the civic/cultural center, market, health center, church and public green areas. They are connected by an elevated walkway to the main building. A small linear building branches out from this complex, pointing towards the city and placed at a 45 degree angle, containing multi-story accommodation and a pedestrian street on the ground floor, which ends at the supermarket — an essential junction with the city.

The design of the structural solution by Riccardo Morandi⁴ coincides with the floor plan. Concrete load-bearing walls repeat every 6 meters, spanned by horizontal slabs placed on top. The façade of the building consists of alternating full and empty strips, i.e., precast concrete panels and ribbon windows.

Access to the main road is provided by a street which branches off of via Portuense and joins a ring road surrounding the public facilities, as well as leading to the 5 entrances of the housing blocks. To the east, beyond the area devoted to sports, one finds the school complex beyond which are the GESCAL houses.

sezione su sala condominiale



02 Mario Fiorentino et al., *Corviale*, Rome, Italy, 1972–84. Section. © Domus, No. 617, 1981.

Overcoming the Ideology of the Neighborhood

Compared to other district plans in Rome, the *Corviale* looks like a radically original model, full of experimental implications regarding urban planning and architectural solutions as well as the construction process and forms of management. Unlike the previous *INA Casa* plan, which had redesigned public housing in Italy,⁵ Law No. 167 does not include any indications for the project, but rather only quantitative and dimensional information.

Precisely because of the quantities that the plan called for, Fiorentino seized on the opportunity to design a “piece” of the city. He rejected the first ideas based on schemes utilized in Italy and more or less derived from preceding European models. He headed towards a radical idea: “a single ‘residential unit’ that includes, in itself, the complexity of relationships present in urban life”⁶. The idea came from research, conducted in schools of architecture, into modern housing. As a frame of reference, the research used Quaroni’s renowned plan for the *Barene di San Giuliano* in Venice, a neighborhood conceived of as a large-scale

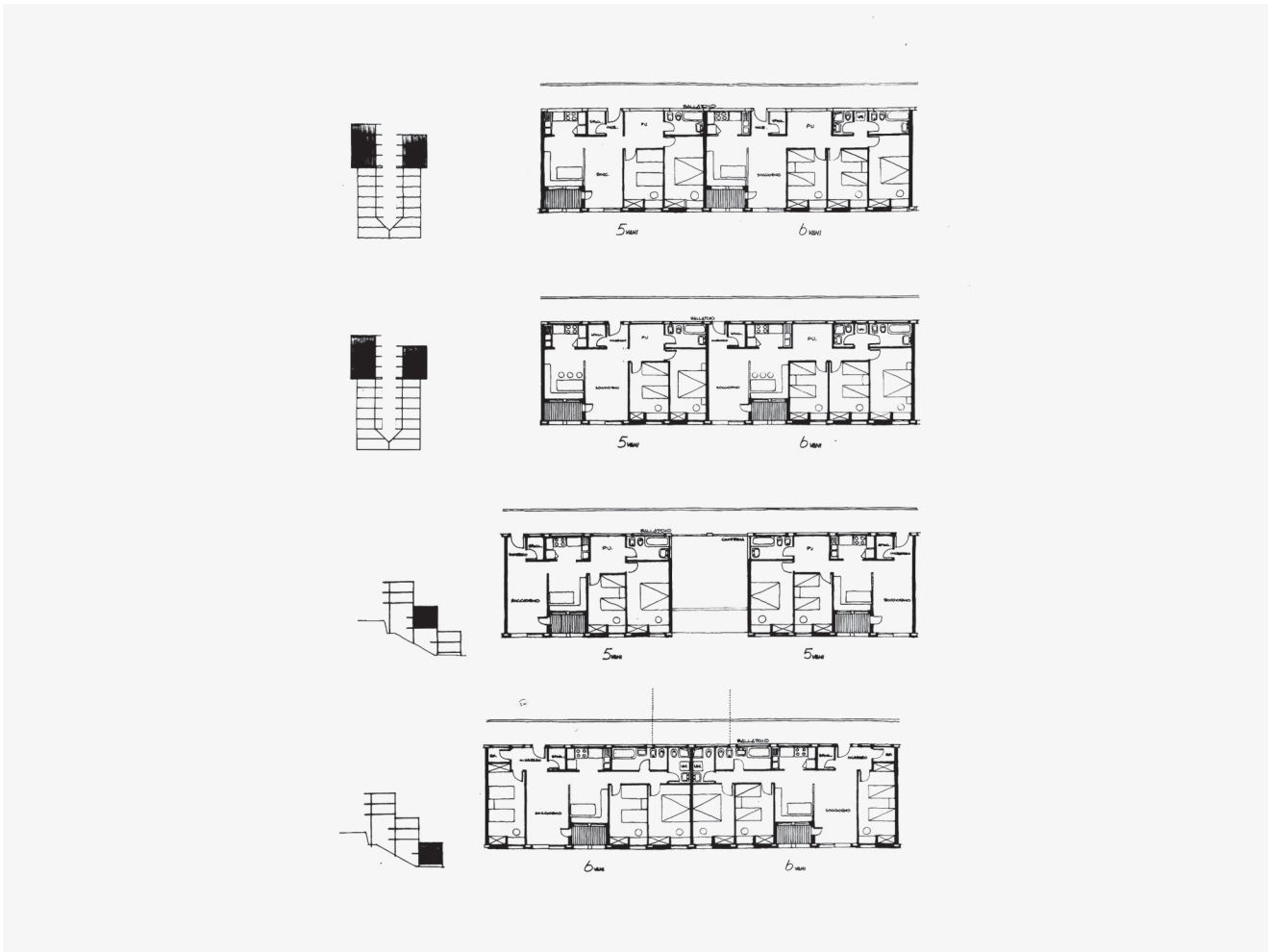
system of relations,⁷ shocking for its powerful symbolic significance in relation with the scale of its environment.

However, Fiorentino searched for continuity between his project and the historical city and its iconography.

*In an attempt to recover the value of ‘symbols’ (...) one cannot escape the references that the city of Rome itself suggests and forget the scale of the baroque and 19th-century city where, from San Michele (300 m) to the manica lunga of the Quirinale (250 m) (...) there are references to a dimensionally reduced urban structure but rich in out-of-scale images.*⁸

Fiorentino, overcoming the sterile tool of the *planivolumetrico* [volumetric plan] searched for a relationship between the morphology of the site and the characteristics of the settlement. This takes on its own identity, taking the form of a dam, serving the dual purpose as city’s edge and border. This idea is reinforced by the ground basement attachment *a scarpa* that roots the building to the soil as a fortification.

The out-of-scale complex plays the role of an architectural emergency, polarizing the urban-fabric of the suburb.

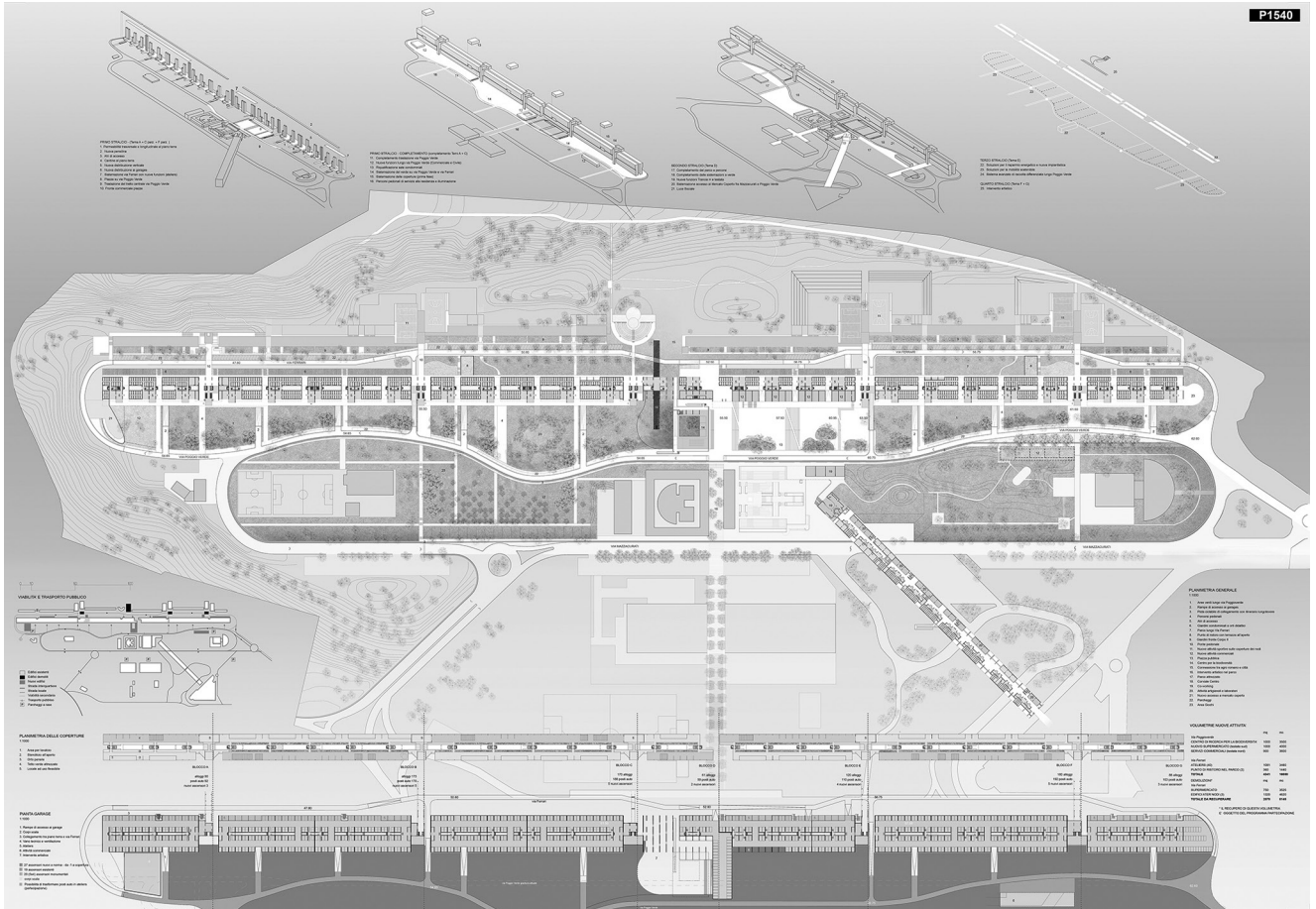


It is essentially a “magnet reorganizing a disintegrated urban site” which opens towards the city, beyond the tradition of the closed self-sufficient neighborhood, and freeing the “suburbs which not even Sironi’s brush could save”¹⁰.

While planning the *Corviale*, given the complexity of the program, they also applied a method of integral and coordinated planning, linking different skills and making choices aimed at encouraging the production of industrial components and building elements.¹¹ In an attempt to propose a new technological model, they granted only one contract that was able to guarantee the success of the project. This choice is connected with the architectural solution of identical façades in which the concrete panel can be considered as an element of mediation between the quality of architecture and the quantity of the building. The pattern of the incisions on the panel (designed by artist Nicola Carino) lends a more domestic and everyday appearance and lessens the city-building’s peremptory size, thanks to the sunlight. The subsequent division of the contract between several companies produced a heterogeneity of building systems hidden behind the carved panel of the façade. In

the main linear building, panels are precast, in the oblique building, panels (identical to the first) are cast on-site. The total prefabrication hoped for by the architect never came to be employed and the *Corviale* would end up reflecting the uncertainty of the Italian construction of the 1970s between hand-crafted systems and industrialized components.

However, one cannot view the *Corviale* only as a relationship between an architectural work and its designer, who defined it as “a tendentious interpretation of the strategy for building affordable public housing in Italy”¹². Fiorentino represents a generation engaged in the confrontation between theory and practise, as well as in urban politics¹³. As the idea of “system” and “application of standards” became more prevalent, architectural research, typological analysis as well as building systems lost their importance. The heated debate between architecture and urban planning saw the triumph of urban planning. The idea of increasing of the city through small and progressive additions that fit the context gave way to the construction of parts of the city with strengths and characters of their own. One experienced the “new dimension” that regards the town design



as an independent configuration tool capable of combining housing and services, architecture and landscape. In this framework, *Corviale* assumed a political role, acting as an organizing element of that disorganized part of the city, resulting from uncontrolled and rampant building speculation. It was an expression of the lively discussion about the expansion and growth of the city. It re-examined the subject of disciplinary research on the topic of public housing and again suggested the problem of the (failed) industrialization of buildings.

Serving as a model, the *Corviale* was — along with the *Monte Amiata* in Gallarate (Carlo Aymonino, 1967–73), the *Villaggio Matteotti* in Terni (Giancarlo De Carlo, 1969–75) and the *Zen* in Palermo (Team Vittorio Gregotti 1969 *et seq.*) — one of the “four examples of residential projects with international scope” in which “the expertise expended in the realization of the various public housing programs hardly ever became known”¹⁴.

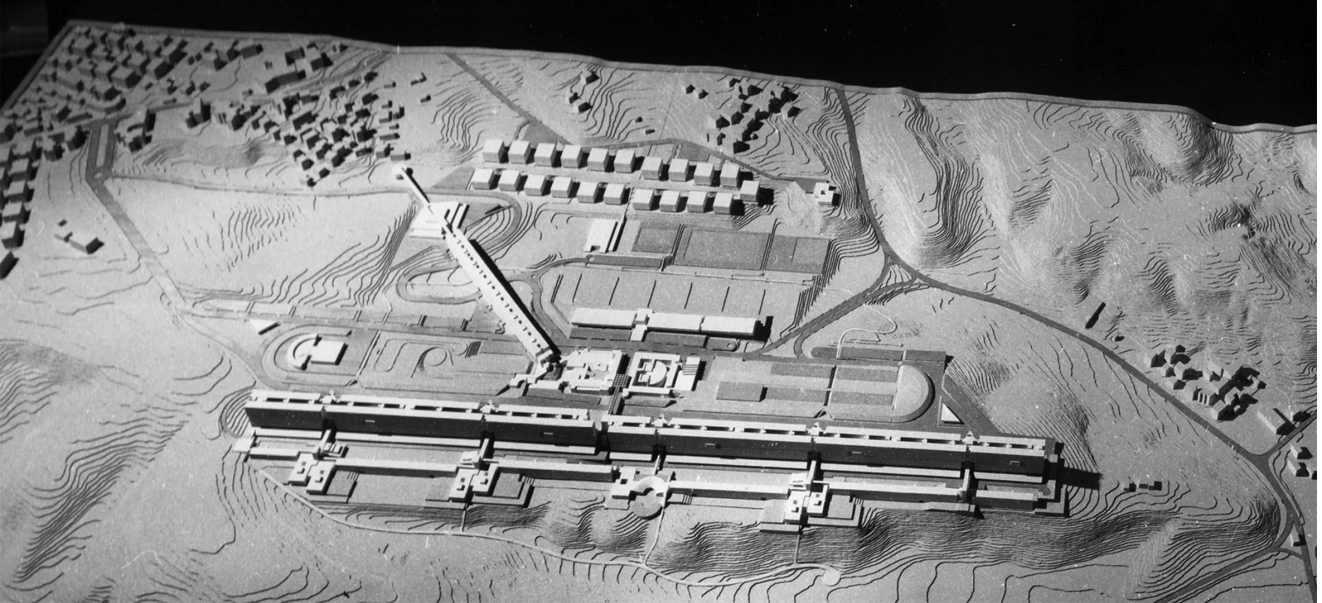
The future *Corviale*

The success of the project was entrusted to the simultaneous construction of the housing and services. However,

beginning with the subdivision of the contract and then the failure of one of the companies resulted in the incompleteness of the structures as well as creating serious difficulties in management from the very beginning. Many apartments were illegally occupied before being completed. The services were also not completed and were gradually transformed into temporary shelters. Even the spaces of the free floor were eventually illegally transformed into apartments with walls and makeshift facilities. The 5 piazzas, were not realized.

The lengthy planning (1972–74) and construction (1975–84) were just the background of a difficult story. This story unfolded with repeated squatting and evictions, widespread disrepair (also due to the absence of maintenance) and a situation of great discomfort due to the social composition of the residents, voiceless and, therefore, anomalous compared to the richness of the city's social fabric.

Over the years, the *Corviale* has witnessed many initiatives to identify strategies for its redevelopment. At the end of the 1990s two buildings were completed as well as the theater, intended as the assembly room for the Municipality, which had placed some offices as well as the library



06 Mario Fiorentino et al., *Corviale*, Rome, Italy, 1972-84. TStudio-Gendalina Salimei, *Corviale*, Rome, Italy, 2009. Rendering of the project for the free floor. © TStudio.



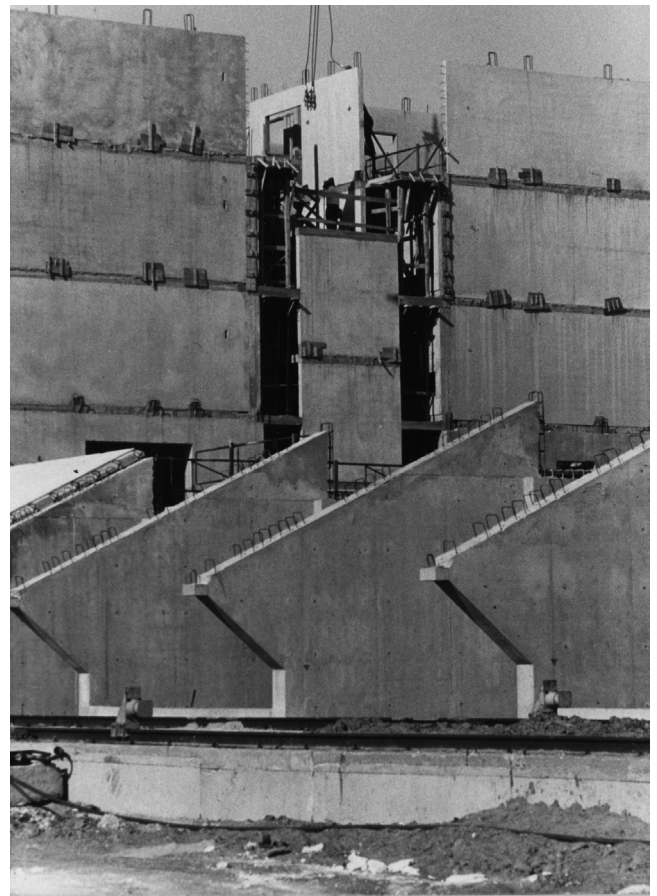
07 Mario Fiorentino et al., *Corviale*, Rome, Italy, 1972-84. Exterior view, historic photo. © MAXXI Museo Nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Rome. Collezione MAXXI Architettura-Archivio Mario Fiorentino.



08 Mario Fiorentino et al., *Corviale*, Rome, Italy, 1972-84. View from a footbridge, historic photo. © MAXXI Museo Nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Rome. Collezione MAXXI Architettura-Archivio Mario Fiorentino.



10 Mario Fiorentino et al. *Corviale*, Rome, Italy, 1972-84. View of the balconies. © Filippo Lorenzi, 2016.



11 Mario Fiorentino et al., *Corviale*, Rome, Italy, 1972-84. The city-building under construction. © MAXXI Museo Nazionale delle arti del xx1 secolo, Rome. Collezione MAXXI Architettura-Archivio Mario Fiorentino.



(an important attraction) within the *Corviale*. However, in 2004, with a *Contratto di Quartiere* [Contract for the District],¹⁵ the City of Rome, the ATER (*Agenzia Territoriale per l'Edilizia Residenziale*, formerly the IACP) and the 15th Municipality proposed a complex activity directly involving the inhabitants through the workshop entitled “Imagining the *Corviale*.”¹⁶ In 2008 ATER invited tenders for the rehabilitation of the free floor, which was won by ATI (*Associazione Temporanea di Imprese*) headed by T-Studio-Guendalina Salimei. Their plan completely redesigns the floor as a green band containing common services and apartments.¹⁷

In 2012, in order to counter suggestions of demolition, a series of forums started. These also involved the commitment of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture¹⁸. The goal is to test a strategic plan on the basis of the principles of the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities as well as the European Landscape Convention. In 2013, the topics were expanded in relation to the objectives of Europe 2020.

On July 31, 2015 ATER announced the International Design Competition “Regenerate *Corviale*”, thanks to the financial support of the Lazio Region. The competition concerned the redesigning of the common areas and the horizontal and vertical paths required to “get a new, better urban and space quality as well as a better living and security for the people.” However, this also had the more ambitious goal of turning the *Corviale* again into a model of urban regeneration. The project chosen was that of the architectural firm of Laura Peretti that focused on the permeability of the city-building and “expressed the ability to control the various ‘scales’ of its complexity, with reference to the landscape, the urban space, circulation inside the building and public space.”

Finally, after about 40 years, the possibility of returning identity and perspective to this important and maltreated piece of the Roman suburbs seems to be materializing. ■

Notes

- 1 “Disposizioni per Favorire l’Acquisizione di Aree Fabbricabili per l’Edilizia Economica e Popolare” [“Provisions to promote the acquisition of building plots for affordable public housing”]. The PEEP includes public housing, subsidized housing, cooperative housing and also a share of private housing.
- 2 Coordination: R. De Simoni, M. Montani and E. Piroddi; Construction (divided into 5 groups): M. Fiorentino (leader), G. De Giorgi, A. Quistelli, H. Selem and F. Sferra Carini; F. Gorio (leader), C. M. Briganti, S. Danielli and E. Ricciardulli; P. M. Lugli (leader), R. De Simoni, M. Montani, A. Montenero and P. Visentini; G. Sterbini (leader), N. Dagostin, F. Donato and E. Piroddi; M. Valori (leader), G. Calpini, R. Einaudi, D. Levanti and G. P. Rotondi. Structural Design: R. Morandi (leader), G. Colombini, M. Valenzi and G. Via. Building services: G. Parolini (leader), F. Conti, C. Pierini, C. Platone and R. Sbriccoli; Scheduling and Costs: F. Novelli and G. Tardella; Artists: N. Carrino, C. Lorenzetti, T. Magnoni, P. Santoro, G. Uncini. Designer: S. Fiorentino.
- 3 The five blocks corresponded to the same number of management units. The block size was chosen based on the maximum size of a condominium manageable by IACP.
- 4 Riccardo Morandi is one of the best-known Italian engineers (also at an international level) especially for his studies on prestressed concrete.
- 5 As a young man, Fiorentino assisted in the *Tiburtino* project (1950–54), one of the first experimental neighborhoods *INA Casa*. He worked alongside Ludovico Quaroni and Mario Ridolfi (team leaders) as well as some of his current collaborators, such as Lugli and Valori.
- 6 Project report, now in Francesco Coccia, *Recupera Corviale*, Roma, Edizione Kappa, 2002.
- 7 The 1959 tender saw the participation of 57 teams of designers that were asked to design a self-sufficient district for 60,000 inhabitants, with 2,600 apartments. This was intended as the expansion of Venice to the edge of the lagoon.
- 8 Project report.
- 9 Manfredo Tafuri, “Diga insicura. Sub termine fagi...”, *Domus*, No. 617, 1981, 22–26.
- 10 *Idem*.
- 11 The project addresses all aspects, from the structure to the installations, from the typology to the technology, from the green areas to the roads, all the way up to the signs and the works of art.
- 12 Bruno Regni, Marina Thiery, “Una Visita Guidata Dieci Anni Fa”, *GROMA*, No. 2, 1993, 59–62.
- 13 Francesco Dal Co, Mario Manieri Elia, “La génération de l’incertitude”, *L’architecture d’aujourd’hui*, 181, 1975, 34–56.
- 14 Manfredo Tafuri, *Storia dell’Architettura Italiana 1944–1985*, Torino, Einaudi 1982, 148.
- 15 Tender announcement by the Ministry of Infrastructure.
- 16 An artistic and multimedia workshop realized with *Fondazione Olivetti and Osservatorio Nomade*.
- 17 The project, approved in 2009, is waiting for the awarding of the contract.
- 18 The forums involve the Ministry, the City of Rome, University *Sapienza*, ATER and the Lazio Region.

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- REBECCHINI, Giuseppe, “La progettazione dei piani di zona”, *Casabella*, No. 438, 1978, 25–41.
- Interview with Mario Fiorentino: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bv6GiVUonUk> transcribed: <http://wilfingarchitettura.blogspot.it/2012/03/0008-squola-mario-fiorentino-corviale.html>

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