The Hardcore Discipline of Coordination: Mario Fiorentino, Housing, and the Project of Corviale

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Mario Fiorentino and Collaborators, Linear housing block at Corviale, completed in 1981. Photo: Zuma Press, Inc. 2023

In 1985, *La Casa* (The House), the first and only monographic book dedicated to the work of Mario Fiorentino, was published, three years after the architect's untimely death.[01] The book was edited by Fiorentino himself and was imagined as an architectural treatise of sorts. As he explains in the introduction, the title highlights the importance of housing as the main focus of his work.[02] Among the projects illustrated in the book, the most well-known is the social housing complex known as "Corviale," which Fiorentino designed together with a large team of architects and engineers between 1973 and 1975. Corviale is a nine-story-high and one-kilometer-long linear structure complemented by another smaller housing bar and by services placed on a sequence of strips that runs parallel to the main building.[03] Partially completed in 1981, Corviale was built by the Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari (IACP) to house 8,500 residents.

Both *La Casa* and Corviale were at odds with their zeitgeist. The early eighties saw the peak of postmodern architecture, which, in Italy, had risen in popularity since the 1980 Venice Biennale, curated by Paolo Portoghesi. The colorful forms of postmodern architecture were the appropriate backdrop to the illusory hedonism felt by Italian society at that point. In this context, the gray mass of Corviale, the ultimate modernist housing project made entirely of concrete, appeared in all of its social and ideological anachronism. The architect Franco Purini has argued that Corviale is a paradox: it was conceived as the ultimate form of housing, but when completed it was received as an obsolete idea.[04]

01 Mario Fiorentino, *La Casa. Progetti 1946-1981* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa,1985).
02 Ibid., 7.
03 To be more precise, the main building is 958 m long and 30 m high.
04 Franco Purini, "Correzioni per un Chilometro," in Richard Plunz, Anna Irene del Monaco, Lucio Barbera (editors), *Corviale Accomplished. Uno studio per Corviale. Funzione e Disfunzione dell'edilizia sociale* (Rome: Sapienza Università Editrice,2009), 560–561.

In the ideological climate of the 1980s, both institutions and public opinion became hostile towards the legacy of social housing. Criticism was particularly acute towards projects built between the sixties and the seventies, a period in which, in Italy, social housing estates reached an unprecedented scale. This was possible because in the late 1960s trade unions were able to mobilize a massive campaign in support of the right to housing, which pushed both social housing agencies, such as IACP and GESCAL, and municipalities to invest in new and unprecedented housing projects.[05] This gave rise to a new generation of housing buildings of enormous proportions. Among these, the most notable are Rozzol Melara in Trieste (1969–1982), ZEN in Palermo (1969–1980), and Laurentino 38 in Rome (1976–1984). These projects were conceived by architects and administrators who were very sympathetic towards housing struggles. For them, these struggles were a call to propose a kind of social housing that could emancipate the working class and give it a visible and monumental form

Seen from the vantage point of today's dramatic housing condition, the criticism of these projects—too ugly, too rigid, too expensive—may appear to be the perfect ideological harbinger of neoliberal policies on housing.

Today, it is clear that a lot of criticism of the social housing built in the last century has inevitably legitimized its dismissal and the promotion of the market as the only solution to housing needs. Yet, at that time, the flawed building process and the unsurmountable difficulty in maintaining the large-scale estates made the critique of social housing sound correct. It was in this context that Corviale became the most obvious target of all the criticism that could, and still can be, mobilized against social housing. Besides being the plastic representation of the 'evil' of mass housing, for many, Corviale was the symbol of architects' and planners' hubris, their (arrogant) tendency to impose on society a built form that could work only in their imagination. Such a response, which was often expressed in very trivial terms as a polemic against an allegedly 'leftist' approach to housing, prompted skepticism also among more careful commentators such as Manfredo Tafuri. In his review of Corviale published in *Domus*, Tafuri called the linear housing structure a "*diga insicura*" (an unsafe dam).[06] The Roman historian imagined Corviale's linear form as a sort of dam that could not resist the pressure of market-driven urbanization.

Fiorentino's book, *La Casa,* was somehow receptive to the skepticism with which Corviale was received. A revelatory editorial decision was Fiorentino's invitation to Carlo Aymonino, Vittorio Gregotti, Ludovico Quaroni, and Giuseppe Samonà—at that time the Gotha of Italian Architecture—to contribute to the book with texts that in some cases read like defenses of the architect's work, and especially of Corviale.[07] However, the four essays can also be read as defenses of the efforts and illusions of a movement that saw in the building of large-scale social housing the most important task for architecture. And yet, Fiorentino's book did little to mitigate the harsh response to Corviale. *La Casa* has never been republished since, and it is scarcely referred to in Corviale's abundant bibliography. Moreover, Fiorentino's point-of-view on Corviale has been consistently ignored, and today his *oeuvre* is almost forgotten. Instead, literature on life at Corviale has poured out in large quantities. No other housing project has solicited such a stream of articles, books, documentaries, movies, and podcasts. Both specialist and non-specialist literature is constantly in the making, as countless events and symposia have been organized to discuss Corviale's present and future.[08]

05 Piero Ostilio Rossi, "Questioni storiche su Corviale," in Ibid., 84.

06 Mafredo Tafuri, "Diga insicura. Sub tegmine fagi," in *Domus*, n. 617 (1981), 22–26.

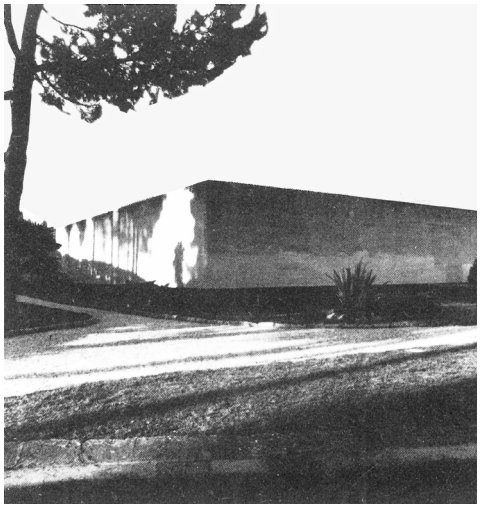
07 This is especially the case for Vittorio Gregotti's contribution. It is important to note that Gregotti was one of the designers of the ZEN housing district in Palermo, which, due to many problems during construction and the lack of rigorous management, became one of the most infamous social housing interventions realized in Italy in the last century. See: Vittorio Gregotti, "Progetti dal 1973 al 1981," in Mario Fiorentino, *La Casa*, XIX, XXI.

08 It would be impossible to list all symposia, books, and research projects done on Corviale. It suffices to say that many of them focus on social life after its completion or on its regeneration. Among them, it is worth mentioning: Nicoletta Campanella, *Nuovo Corviale, miti, utopie, valutazioni* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1995); Francesco Coccia, Maria Cristina Costanzo (editors), *Recuperare Corviale. Un Convegno Imternazionale* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 2002); and Anna Irene del Monaco, Lucio Barbera (editors), *Corviale Accomplished. Uno studio per Corviale. Funzione e Disfunzione dell'edilizia sociale* (2009). A very interesting reading of Corviale's post-occupancy is offered by Rocio Calzado, "A political Taxonomy of Corviale" in E-Flux Architecture (May 2024), Accessed on Mar 16, 2025, https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/framing-renovation/604237/a-political-taxonomy-of-corviale/.

However, in all these cases —with few exceptions—Corviale is always read as social problem, not as an architectural project. Most of the literature on Corviale has focused on the life of its inhabitants and their vicissitudes. There is no doubt that this side of the story is important. However, in the notes that follow, I would like—for once —to avoid the post-occupancy discourse and focus instead on Corviale as a *project*. In doing so I will not simply look at Corviale itself but retrace Mario Fiorentino's work on housing in order to show how the idea of Corviale emerged from this work. My argument is that it is by focusing on Corviale as project we can reclaim its legacy, as well as the very idea of social housing, from its current neoliberal nemesis.

MINIMALISM AND POPULISM

Born in Rome in 1919, Mario Fiorentino belongs to the generation that started practicing in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. He contributed to two of the most emblematic projects of Postwar Italy: the memorial for the mass murder of 335 men perpetuated by the SS in March 1944 at the Fosse Ardeatine in Rome and the housing district INA CASA at Tiburtino, also in Rome. In both projects, Fiorentino shared the authorship with a large cohort of designers, which, in the case of the Tiburtino, read like a who's who of the Italian Postwar architectural scene. As we'll see, especially with Corviale, teamwork was a constant in Fiorentino's approach to architecture, and especially in his work on housing. Another remarkable aspect of these two projects is that they are radically different, both in terms of program and design attitude.



Left: Mario Fiorentino, Nello Aprile, Cino Calcaprina, Aldo Cardelli, Francesco Coccia (sculptor), memorial to the victims of the Fosse Ardeatine, Rome, 1946-48; views of the burial site.Right: Aerial View of Tiburtino INA-CASA housing district. From Mario Fiorentino, *La casa* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 1985), 18,24.

The Fosse Ardeatine memorial consists of two parts: the preservation of the caves where the prisoners were executed and a burial site. The latter is a cemetery covered by a massive six-meter-thick roof measuring 25x50m, supported by six rectangular pillars. Because the pillars are hidden by the cantilevering roof, the latter's heavy mass seems to float, leaving an open slit that sheds a dim light on the cemetery. According to the designer's intentions, the monolithic roof was meant to evoke a gigantic tombstone, and such a reference was chosen to celebrate the memory of the massacre in the most straightforward way, avoiding any overtly rhetorical form.[09]

09 Mario Fiorentino, *La Casa*., 35.

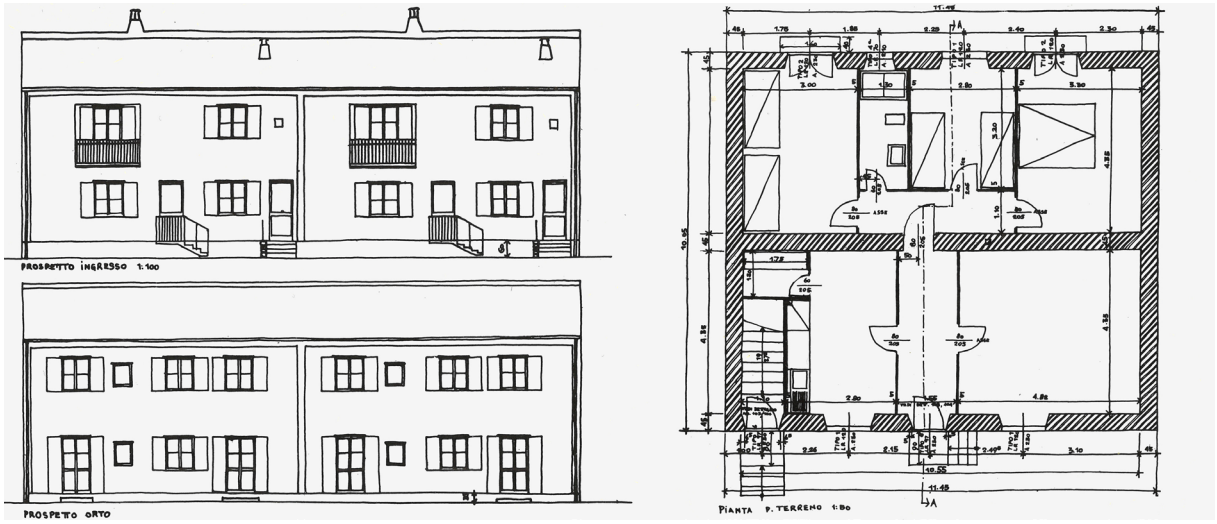
It is worth keeping in mind that the Fosse Ardeatine memorial was the first monumental structure built after the end of Fascist Italy, a regime that had abused monumentality in the most rhetorical manner.
In the text presenting the project, Fiorentino recalled how the decision to use the tombstone as the main image of the memorial was agreed upon with the victims' families, who felt no other analogy could make justice of the absurd death of their loved ones.[10] But the image of the tombstone also bears references to the history of the place. The site of the Fosse Ardeatine is located on the south-east outskirts of Rome, an area famous for the catacombs, subterranean cemeteries built by Jewish and Christian communities at the time of the Roman Empire. Another reference was the Via Appia, which, like many Roman consular roads, was flanked by tombs built by Roman citizens. Although the 'Appian cemetery' was largely made dilapidated in the course of the last three centuries, it is still possible to appreciate the contrast between the monumentality of the few surviving funeral moments and the picturesque landscape of the Roman Campagna. By rendering the memorial roof as an abstract monolith, Fiorentino and his teammates wanted to recuperate, and even radicalize with "fanatic puritanism," the contrast between architecture and landscape.[11] This contrast emerges in many Fiorentino's projects and is paramount in the conception of Corviale. Looking at a photograph of the memorial, in which the abstraction of the concrete roof is thrown into contrast by its picturesque surrounding landscape, it is tempting to see in it an anticipation of the way the housing wall of Corviale appears within the gentle hills of the Roman Campagna.

The populist architecture of Tiburtino stands in opposition to the minimalism of Fosse Ardeatine. Built within the social housing program INA CASA, the Tiburtino estate was located on the Via Tiburtina, far from the city center. According to the intentions of its designers—a large team of young architects guided by Ludovico Quaroni and Mario Ridolfi—Tiburtino was meant to become the pilot project for a renewed approach to housing and architecture. The architects of Tiburtino adopted a vernacular language that mimicked an idealized village-like urban form. This goal was pursued by employing features like pitched roofs and a rich assortment of idyosincratic features like chimneys and ornamented balustrades, but also by devising an urban layout that avoided any form of orthogonality. As such, Tiburtino was a nod to the form of Italian rural *borghi*, the place of origin of many residents of the Roman periphery.[12] Tiburtino could be considered an architectural translation of what in cinema and literature was known as "Neorealismo," a tradition that privileged working-class and folk culture as an antidote to Fascist's rhetorical populism.[13] It so happened that, unwittingly, architectural Neorealismo aligned relatively easily with the Christian Democrats' populism. In fact, the ideology behind the INA CASA housing program was to appeal to workers by offering them a village-like housing form in which the ethos of the working class was diluted into a paternalistic rustic environment.

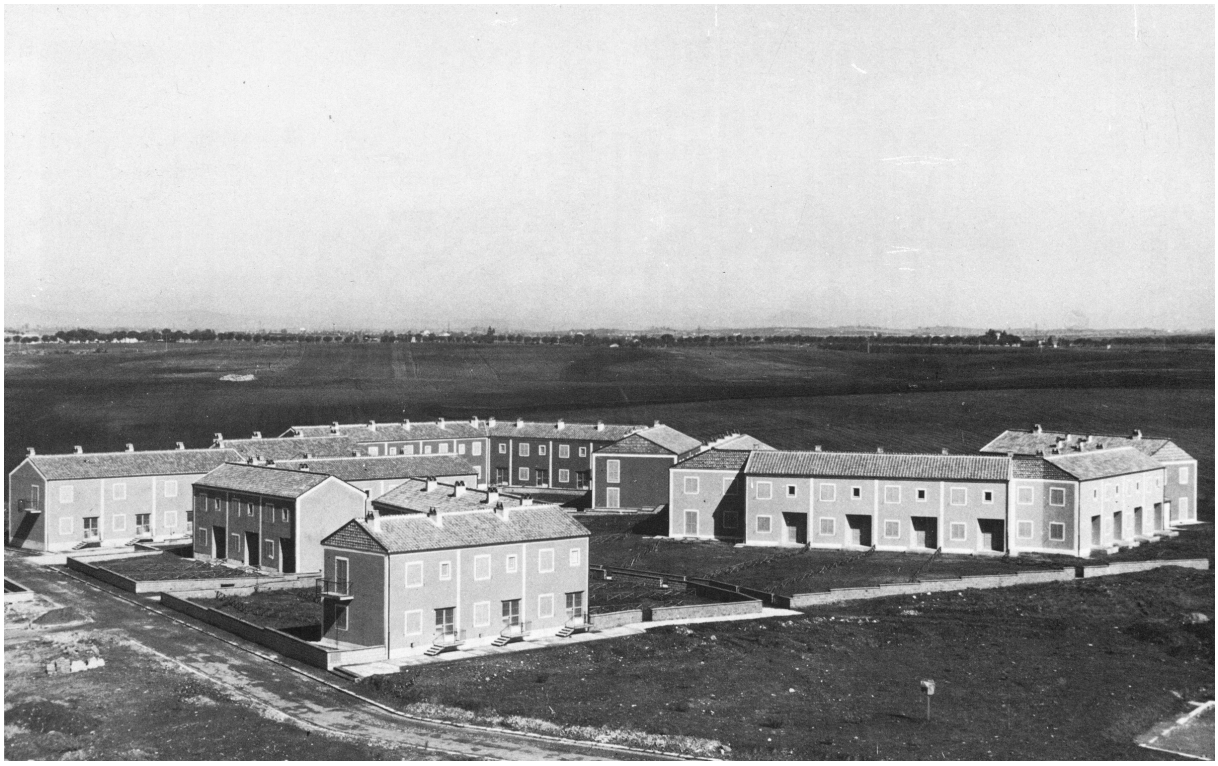
This strategy is evident in several problematic aspects of the INA CASA plan. The first problem was the lack of planning at the scale of the city, which gave housing authorities and municipalities the ability to use social housing in order to support land speculation.[14] Once the new settlements were built, the necessary infrastructure, such as roads, lighting, and sewage, would be inevitably exploited by market housing. The second problematic aspect of INA CASA was its tacit promotion of traditional building techniques to avoid any form of standardization and favor a labor-intensive construction process that would secure high employment. If this approach can appear today as emancipatory, at that time it followed the Christian Democrats' avoidance of industrial production that would inevitably trigger the formation of an organized workforce within the construction industry.

10 Ibid., 35.
11 Ibid., 35.
12 Manfredo Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture, 1944–1985* (Cambridge, Ma.: The MIT Press), 23–34.
13 On this topic, see: David Escudero, *Neorealist Architecture: Aesthetics of Dwelling in Postwar Italy* (London: Routledge, 2022).
14 Sergio Stenti, *Housing in Italia. Dalle case popolari all'edilizia sociale privata 1903–2015* (Naples: 2023), 51–53.

Precisely because construction was one of the strongest economies in Italy, its deregulation in terms of both planning and building processes was considered a way to support this sector and avoid its potential unionization as in other sectors of industry. Ironically, or perhaps tragically, the best intentions of the architects of Tiburtino—all leaning towards the left and close to, if not members of, either the Communist or the Socialist Party—ended up feeding the housing politics promoted by the Christian Democrats. After the completion of Tiburtino, its architects were quick to realize this convergence and, in presenting the project in *Casabella Continuità*, Quaroni penned an unusually bitter reflection on the project.[15]



Mario Fiorentino, Saverio Boselli, San Basilio UNRRA-CASAS social housing, 1955;
plans and facade of the four-apartment type. From Mario Fiorentino, *La cas*a (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 1985), 61, 57



Mario Mario Fiorentino, Saverio Boselli, San Basilio UNRRA-CASAS social housing, 1955; aerial view.
From Mario Fiorentino, *La casa* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 1985), 61, 57.

15 Ludovico Quaroni, "Il paese dei barocchi," *Casabella-continuità* 215 (April–May 1957): 24.

A compromise between the minimalism of the Fosse Ardeatine memorial and the populism of Tiburtino was found by Fiorentino in his project for the housing estate at San Basilio, 15 km east of Rome.[16] Like Tiburtino, the estate was conceived as a self-sufficient settlement for 1,000 inhabitants, and its form was meant to evoke the picturesque atmosphere of the peasant borgo. Yet, the two-story rowhouses, articulated around open courtyards, were more austere than the housing at Tiburtino. Against Tiburtino's formal and typological variation, in San Basilio, Fiorentino relied on repetition and simplification of form. All the apartments are based on two modules, 10x11m and 6.15x7.30m, aggregated to form rows of three, four, or five houses. In this way, the rows made of small units look like larger *casali*, a rural house type present in the Roman Agro. However, this reference was tempered by a strict rational design in which repetition is more important than difference. In Fiorentino's intentions, simplicity of form was meant to ease and speed up the design and construction process.[17] San Basilio was built as part of the aid provided by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, coordinated in Rome by the enlightened entrepreneur Adriano Olivetti. This framework provided more room for experimentation, but as Fiorentino noted, San Basilio was a victim of the lack of coordination between the building of housing and the necessary infrastructure (roads, sewage, and water distribution) which escalated costs and delayed completion.[18] Experiences like these were a sort of precocious baptism of fire for Fiorentino, who found himself very early in his career confronted with projects that were both pragmatic and ideological. Pragmatic because they imposed on both designers and planners the constraints of a strict economy of means (low budgets, tight schedules, and reliance on a disorganized and artisanal workforce); ideological, because this 'economy of means' was the deliberate result of a political project to keep the construction industry both active and backward. Fiorentino's design efforts can be interpreted as one of the most significant efforts in dealing with these conditions towards a rational approach to housing.

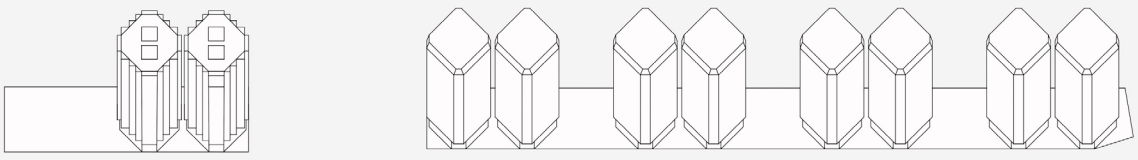
FROM TOWERS TO WALL

A remarkable example of Fiorentino's approach to housing are the towers in Viale Etiopia (1957–62). Conceived as nine-story towers aggregated linearly in five pairs, the complex of Viale Etiopia forms a permeable wall that defined the edge of a dense district—the so-called Quartiere Africano. The architecture of these towers is a deliberate reinterpretation of the adjacent social housing complex designed a few years earlier by Mario Ridolfi, Fiorentino's mentor, in collaboration with Wolfgang Frankl as part of the INA CASA programBecause of the high cost of land, Ridolfi was forced to adopt the tower, an unusual type for a program that favored village-like settlements. The main architectural feature of Ridolfi's towers was the exposed cast-in-place concrete skeleton, which gave to their form a harsh, brutalist appearance. The exposed concrete skeleton is an important trope of modern Italian architecture.[19] This structural form was introduced in Italy with the construction of the Fiat Factory in Turin—the Lingotto—designed by the engineer Giacomo Matté-Trucco (1915–1922). Since then, it has been used in many buildings—especially housing projects—and in his towers, Mario Ridolfi gave to this structural form one of its most dramatic interpretations. Rather than having posts and lintels on the same plane, posts project outwards, and lintels are slanted. This solution transformed the abstraction of the skeleton into an expressionist knot that casts a dramatic shadow play. Moreover, windows, parapets, and balconies were decorated with hand-made maiolica and wrought iron.

16 Mario Fiorentino, *La Casa*, 55–68.
17 Ibid., 67.
18 Ibid., 67.
19 Roberto Gargiani, *Razionalismo retorico per il regime fascista 1914–1944. Eretici Italiani dell'architettura razionalista 2021* (Milan: Skira, 2021); *Razionalismo emozionale per l'identità democratica nazionale 1945–1966* (Milan: Skira, 2021).

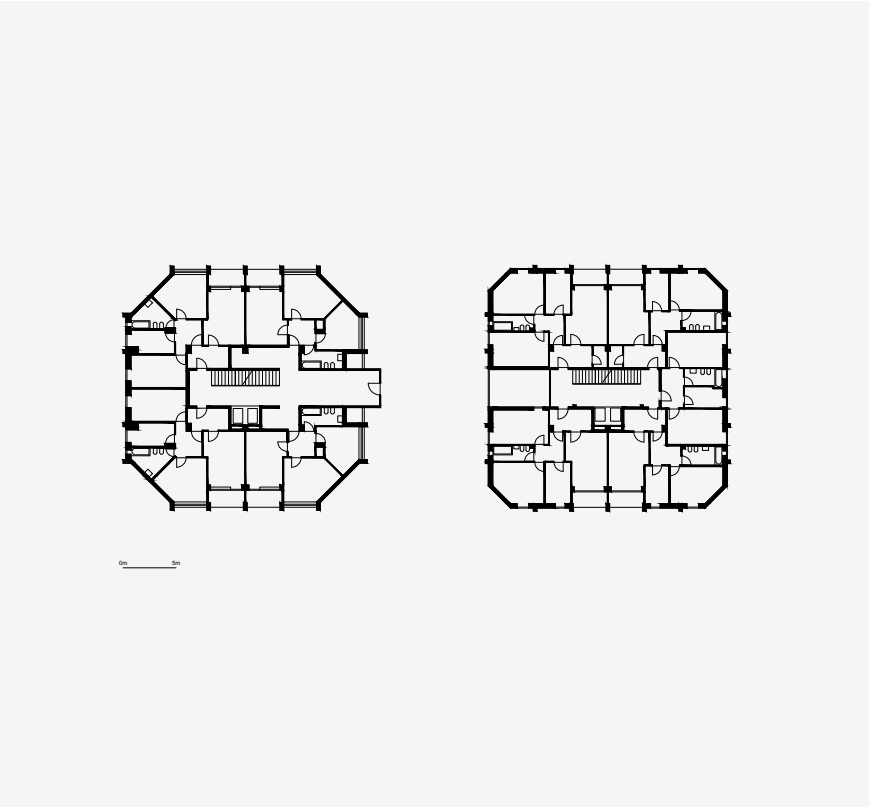
The use of these elements was Ridolfi's attempt to integrate artisanal craft into modern construction, an approach that desperately resisted the abstraction of modern built form. Ridolfi's rejection of advanced technology in building was clearly reflected in the making of the *Manuale dell'architetto*, an extremely influential handbook for architects published in 1946 by Italy's National Council of Research (CNR) with the financial support of the United States Information Service (USIS). Fiorentino himself was part of the *Manuale*'s editorial team, led by Ridolfi, and some of the design solutions of his early housing projects, such as San Basilio, seem to be tests of constructive principles illustrated in that book. The manual tacitly promoted a traditional approach to construction by proposing building solutions that could easily rely on artisanal know-how. However, in his towers in Viale Etiopia, Fiorentino adopted the exposed structural frame but in a more subdued version, in which the lintel almost disappears as it is flush with the infill of tufa blocks. In this way, the dominant element of the façade is no longer the concrete frame, but the simple alternation of openings and walls. More than an homage, Fiorentino's towers should, therefore, be interpreted as a critique of the folk-aesthetics of neorealist architecture and as attempt to reclaim a more technically advanced form for housing. This direction is even stronger in the two towers added in the second stage, and in which Fiorentino kept the structural frame hidden behind abstract concrete paneling. Two remarkable features of these towers are its radiating rooms and two large courtyard/shafts that ventilate all the spaces located at the core of the tower. This unusual solution for a high-rise building anticipates a typological feature present in several Fiorentino's housing projects including Corviale: the narrow courtyard/shaft.

Against the structural expressionism of much Postwar Italian architecture, Fiorentino's towers in Viale Etiopia are a sober meditation on the relationship between structure, typology, and urban form. The serene cadence of openings, the use of exposed tufa masonry or concrete paneling, the subtly proportioned elevations—neither too high, like skyscrapers, nor too low, like palazzinas—give the towers a sense of formal control that is almost Palladian. Their aggregation at 45 degrees, the regularity of their siting, make the towers a precise urban form that Fiorentino himself compared retrospectively to the austere logic of minimalist sculpture.[20]



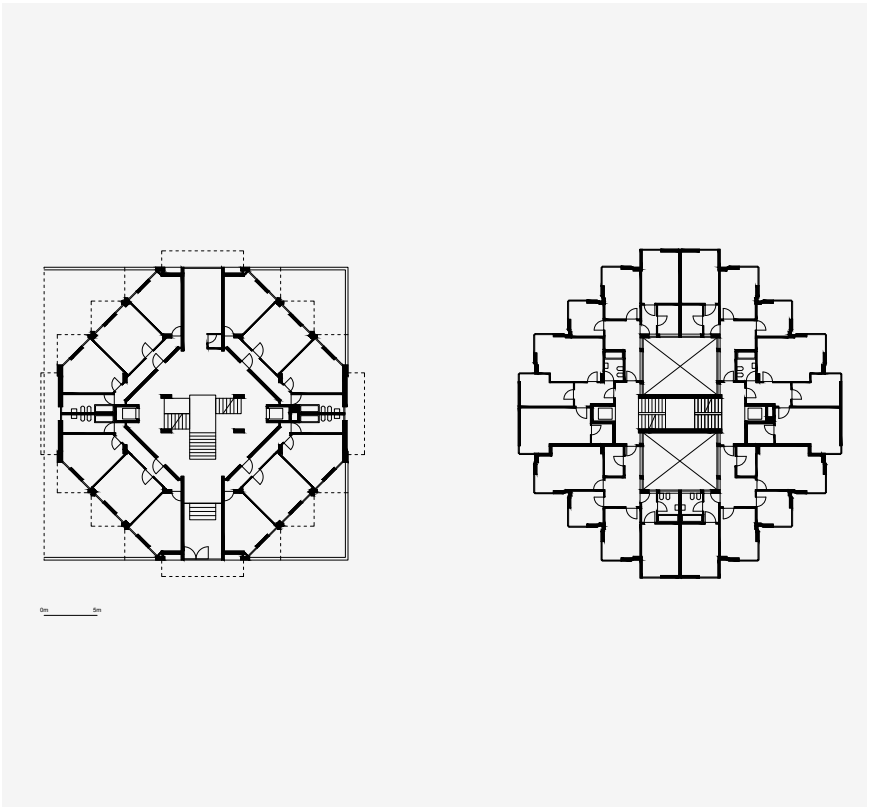
Mario Fiorentino, Housing Towers at Viale Etiopia, Rome 1957-62, Site plan.
Drawing by Marson Korbi.

20 Mario Fiorentino, *La casa*, 10.

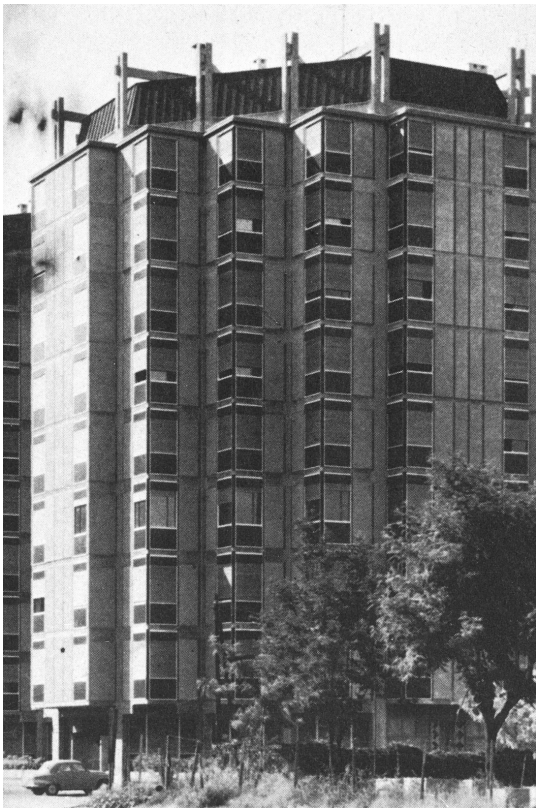


Mario Fiorentino, Housing Towers at Viale Etiopia, Rome 1957-62. Ground floor plans. Drawing by Romain Barth.

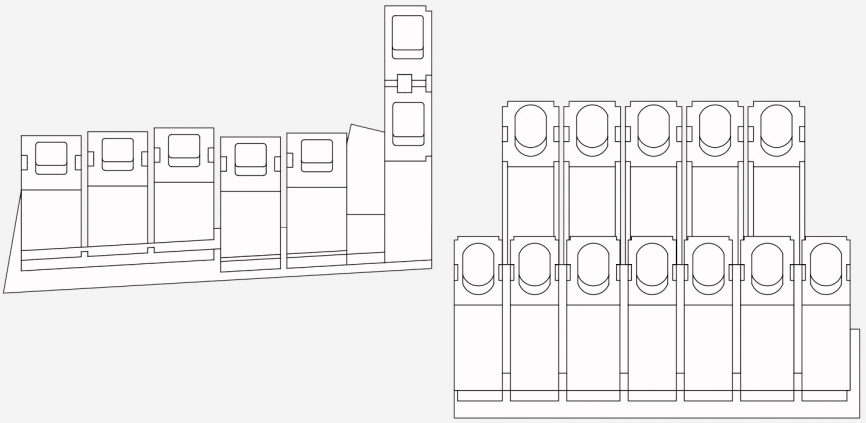
Mario Fiorentino, Housing Towers at Viale Etiopia, Rome 1957-58. First phase. From Mario Fiorentino, *La casa* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 1985), 227.



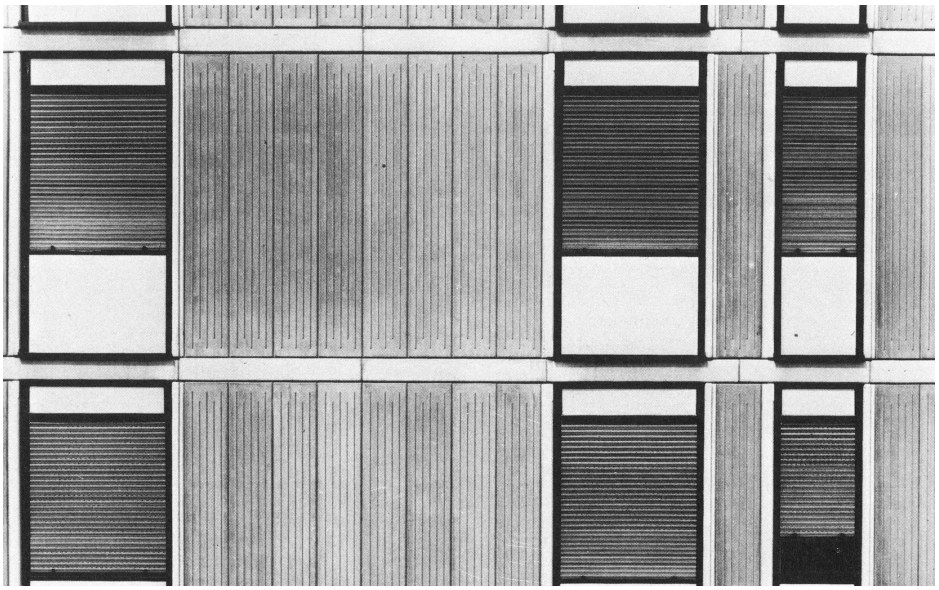
Mario Fiorentino, Housing Towers at Viale Etiopia, Rome 1957-62. Typical plan. Drawing by Romain Barth.



Mario Fiorentino, Housing Towers at Viale Etiopia, Rome 1960-62. Second phase. From: Mario Fiorentino, *La casa* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 1985), 227.



Mario Fiorentino, Housing towers at Pietralata, Rome, 1963-65.
Drawn by Marson Korbi.

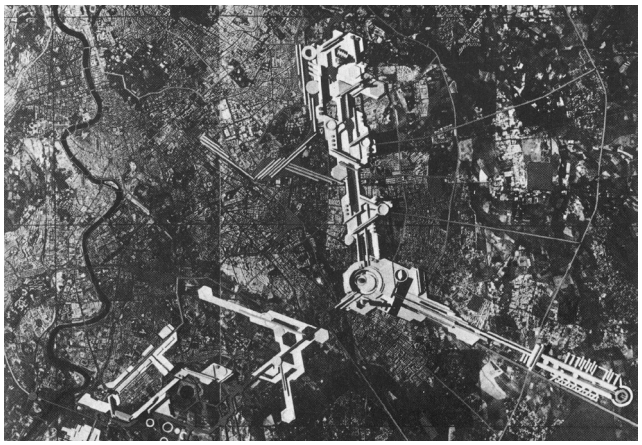


Left: Mario Fiorentino, Housing towers at Pietralata, Rome, 1963-65. view of the slit in between the towers. Right: Mario Fiorentino, Housing towers at Pietralata, Rome, 1963-65. Detail of the façade. From: Mario Fiorentino, *La casa* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 1985), 268,273.

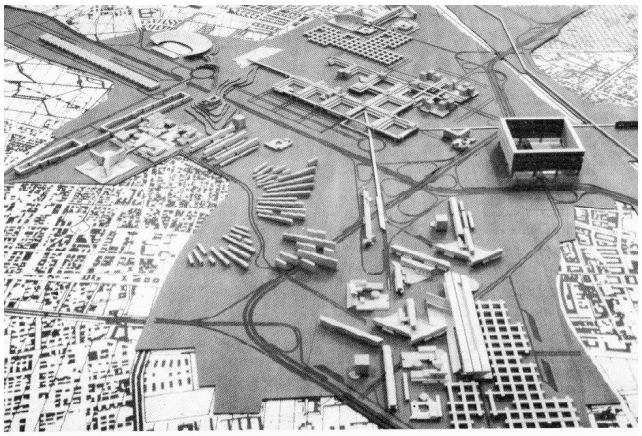
This approach was further reinforced in another housing estate designed by Fiorentino in the district of Pietralata, also in Rome (1963–1965). Here the towers are so tightly aggregated that they form a wall. What separates them is a narrow cut that becomes a generous shaft at the center of the section. This solution defines the typical plan of the towers in which bathrooms and kitchens are located at the center and are ventilated by the shaft. In this way all the rooms are linearly arranged along the eastern and western façades, a solution that will be perfected at Corviale. Like in the last two towers completed at Viale Etiopia, the load-bearing structure is hidden behind concrete panels, a solution that makes the facades a plain composition of solid and void. It is interesting to note that, from this moment onwards, Fiorentino conceived most of his housing projects as a linear composition, a wall. Moreover, looking at the projects described above, it becomes clear that Fiorentino interpreted the housing estate no longer as a cluster of buildings, but as a unitary artifact that frames and orients its context.

ARCHIPELAGO VS MEGASTRUCTURE

In the late 1960s Fiorentino slowed down his professional practice and worked on research projects. Among these, the most well-known was the study for the Asse Attrezzato, a megastructure that was meant to concentrate a large portion of the tertiary activities in the eastern periphery of Rome (1967–70). An unsolicited and self-funded project, the Asse Attrezzato was developed as part of a team named Studio Asse, which included Quaroni and Bruno Zevi. The goal of the team was to provide a clear architectural response to stipulations of the 1962 regulatory plan.[21] The Asse Attrezzato was imagined by Fiorentino and his teammates as a linear aggregation of gigantic buildings linked by a complex transportation system. What is striking about this project is its convoluted form, its plethora of urban figures from circus to linear building, in which architecture and infrastructure become one system. It is interesting to note that a similar approach was applied by Fiorentino to similar projects such as his proposal for another tertiary district at the Flaminio area in Rome (1972) and his proposal for the restructuring of the seaside town of Ostia (1972). In all these unbuilt proposals, Fiorentino explored the possibility of creating large-scale forms that would concentrate massive programs of housing, workspaces, and services into unitary linear systems. Developed at the peak of Italy's welfare state, these projects relied on the idea that planning and architecture would merge as one large-scale operation.



Studio Asse (Vittorio Delleani, Mario Fiorentino, Riccardo Morandi, Lucio Passarelli, Ludovico Quaroni, Bruno Zevi), Study for the 'Asse Attrezzato'1967-70. From Mario Fiorentino, *La casa* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, Rome, 1985), 188.



Carlo Aymonino, Constantino Dardi, Raffaele Panella, Roma Est, 1973. Model of the intervention.

21 Ibid., 190: see also the monographic double-issue of Bruno Zevi's *L'architettura - Cronache e Storia* devoted to this project. *L'architettura - Cronache e Storia*, 238–239 (August 1975).

As argued by Gabriele Mastrigli, a critical response to Studio Asse's proposal (and megastructures in general) was the Roma Est project developed by Carlo Aymonino, Constantino Dardi, and Raffaele Panella for the 15th Triennale of Milan (1973).[22] The project responded to the same issue that solicited the Asse Attrezzato but, rather than concentrating the eastern expansion of Rome within a linear megastructure, Aymonino, Dardi, and Panella proposed an archipelago of large-scale artifacts. These artifacts were a composition of 'ready-made' projects among which were Aymonino's proposal for a 12,000-student university center in Cagliari (1972); Le Corbusier's Olivetti workshops in Rho, near Milan (1963); Karl Ehn's Karl-Marx-Hof (1920–23); and the Centro Direzionale (business district) in Turin proposed by Aldo Rossi, Luca Meda, and Gianugo Polesello (1961). The latter project—a gigantic quadrangular building measuring 300x300 m in plan—exemplified Aymonino and Dardi's intention to plan the new city as a composition of large-scale finite urban artifacts that confronted each other within the landscape of the Roman Agro. This approach to architecture and urban design derived from the research of Gruppo Architettura, a cohort of architects led by Aymonino who were teaching and conducting research at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia in the early 1970s.[23] Members of Gruppo Architettura—like Aymonino himself—were close to the Italian Communist Party and the tacit goal of their projects and research was to put forward an idea of the socialist city by studying and reclaiming the legacy of European Rationalist architecture.[24] This leftist reappropriation of rationalism was also pursued by Aldo Rossi in his curatorship of the 1973 Milan Triennale where Aymonino and Dardi's proposal for Rome was presented.[25] It is important to remember that there was a strong kinship between the Gruppo Architettura and Rossi, as both were focusing on the idea of type and architecture as urban artifact.[26] My hypothesis is that although *Roma Est* was an implicit critique of Studio Asse's megastructure, it had an impact on Fiorentino, who moved away from the idea of megastructure towards an idea of the city made by large-scale yet *finite* urban forms. If, superficially, Corviale may appear as a megastructure, its gigantic but finite form fits better within the approach theorized by Aymonino, Dardi, and Panella in *Roma Est*. For Studio Asse the city was to become a continuous system in which circulation would serve as structuring element.

Contrary to this position, *Roma Est* postulated a city as an archipelago of finite large-scale artifacts. It was within this idea that Fiorentino may have revisited his projects for Viale Etiopia and Pietralata through the lens of Aymonino's theory of the 'città per parti' (city made of parts). According to this theory, the city is not a unitary system defined by an overall plan, but an archipelago of large-scale urban artifacts—sometimes in the form of gigantic complexes, such as the Karl Marx Hof in Vienna. For Aymonino, the 'city made of parts' was a realistic project, because it accepted that the urban is rarely the outcome of one single plan.[27] At the same time, considering the city as made of parts was also an attempt to seek a meaningful relationship between these parts. Such an approach for Aymonino required architects and planners to focus on the relationship between the distributive logic of buildings, that is their type, and the form of the city itself. An example of this was Red Vienna—the housing policy that produced 400 new housing blocks between 1924 and 1934—in which the Social Democratic municipality adopted the courtyard type known as *Hof* as the underlying principle for all the interventions. For Aymonino, Red Vienna was a coherent project for the city without being an overall and totalizing plan for the city.[28]

22 Gabriele Mastrigli, "The Presence of Extremes, Carlo Aymonino, The 'City of Parts' and the Question of Roman Est," in Manuel Orazi (editor), *Carlo Aymonino, Fedeltà al Tradimento. Loyality to Betrayal* (Milan: Electa, 2021), 66–67. See also: Carlo Aymonino, Constantino Dardi, Raffaele Panella, "Proposta Architettonica per Roma Est," in *Controspazio*, n. 6 (December), 1973, 46–47.

23 Luka Skansi, "Observations on the Genealogy of an Educational Research: Carlo Aymonino and the Notebooks of the 'Gruppo Architettura,'" in *Carlo Aymonino, Fedeltà al Tradimento. Loyality to Betrayal* (Milan: Electa, 2021), 70–77.

24 Ibid., 77.

25 Aldo Rossi (editor), *Architettura Razionale* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1973).

26 Luka Skansi, "Observations on the Genealogy of an Educational Research: Carlo Aymonino and the Notebooks of the 'Gruppo Architettura,'" in *Carlo Aymonino, Fedeltà al Tradimento. Loyality to Betrayal,* 77.

27 Carlo Aymonino, *Il Significato della Città* (Bari: Laterza, 1975), 40–43.

28 Carlo Aymonino, *Gli alloggi della municipalità di Vienna, 1922–1932* (Bari: Dedalo, 1965), 7.

THE MONOBLOCK

In 1972, while starting work on Corviale, Fiorentino begun his teaching at the school of architecture in Rome. As he wrote, it was in this context that he became increasingly interested in the research work developed by Aymonino in Venice and by Rossi in Milan.[29] The main focus of his design studio was housing as large-scale urban artifact, an idea explored by Aymonino and Rossi in their housing complex Monte Amiata in the Gallaratese neighborhood in Milan (1968–71). The idea of housing as large-scale artifact emerged in the shadow of two important policies for housing in Italy: Legge 167 (1962) and the Legge 865, also known as "Legge Casa" (1971). The first policy postulated the possibility for municipalities to modify their existing land use through *Piani di Zona* (local plans) in order to provide sufficient land for large-scale housing estates.[30] Although the law was part and parcel of a larger urban reform not fully implemented, it gave impetus to the building of vast housing projects that were often conceived as unitary urban forms. The Legge Casa strengthened the municipalities' power to buy land at minimum cost and allowed social housing agencies to invest in all the services necessary to support housing itself. The Legge Casa was perhaps the most radical policy for housing advanced in Italy because it made housing a social service comparable to healthcare and education.[31]As mentioned earlier, this law was the state's response to the massive protests about the right to decent housing that took place since the 1960s. It was the radicality of this policy that prompted architects such as Fiorentino and Vittorio Gregotti to design housing as a social condenser, which could concentrate many functions in monumental urban forms, the so-called "monoblock."[32] What prompted the rise of the monoblock was the architects' conception of social housing as a project within and against the city produced by speculation. Rather than being just a shelter, social housing was imagined by these architects as a place of intense socialization and solidarity. Housing was thus conceived as a public monument in the same manner as the *Höfe* built in Red Vienna.

But there was also another reason for the choice of the large-scale monoblock. As Fiorentino noted, the idea of the city as made of large-scale artifacts is deeply rooted in the history of Rome.[33] Unlike its colonies, the ancient city of Rome was never defined by an overall plan. Through the centuries, Rome's hilly topography was dominated by gigantic artifacts such as the many fora, the imperial baths, and the basilicas, often built in confrontation with each other.

Such idiosyncratic urban form developed further in the Renaissance and Baroque period in which many Popes attempted to transform the form of the city by initiating large-scale architectural works, like churches, palaces, and even streets and squares. Rather than evolving through a plan, the city of Rome was built as an archipelago of monumental structures that produced a multi-polar urban form. The best image of this condition is Leonardo Bufalini's map of Rome published in 1551, which shows how most of the eastern part of the city, while enclosed by the Aurelian walls, was actually almost devoid of houses and dominated by large-scale ruins such as the Coliseum, the Circus Maximus, and the Baths of Caracalla. This landscape in which there is no mediation between landscape and architecture was the inspiration for architects such as Bramante, whose Belvedere in the Vatican (1505) and Court House in Via Giulia (1506) were an attempt to the reclaim the scale of ancient Roman structures within modern Rome.

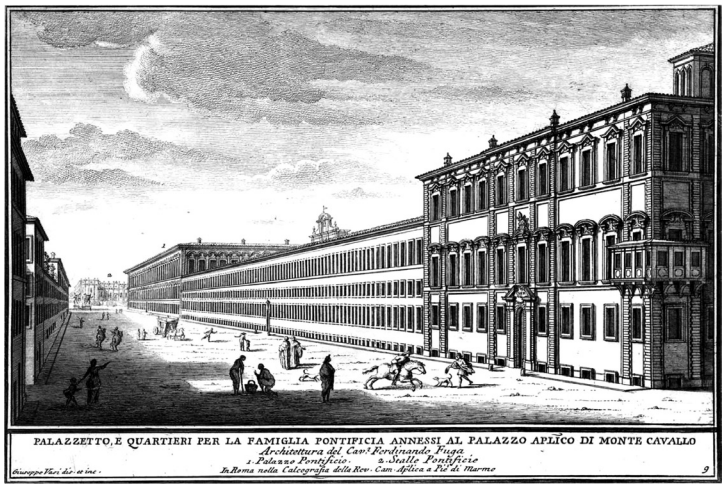
29 Mario Fiorentino, *La Casa*, 11. This hypothesis may be confirmed by the fact that one of Fiorentino's assistants was Renato Nicolini, an architect responsible for culture in the Municipality of Rome from 1976 to 1985, the period in which the Italian Communist party was governing the city. Nicolini was aligned both with Rossi's and Aymonino's theories.

30 For a short compendium of these two laws and their impact on norms and types for residential architecture see: Michele Di Sivo, *Normativa e tipologia dell'abitazione popolare* (Florence: Alinea, 1981), 98–118.

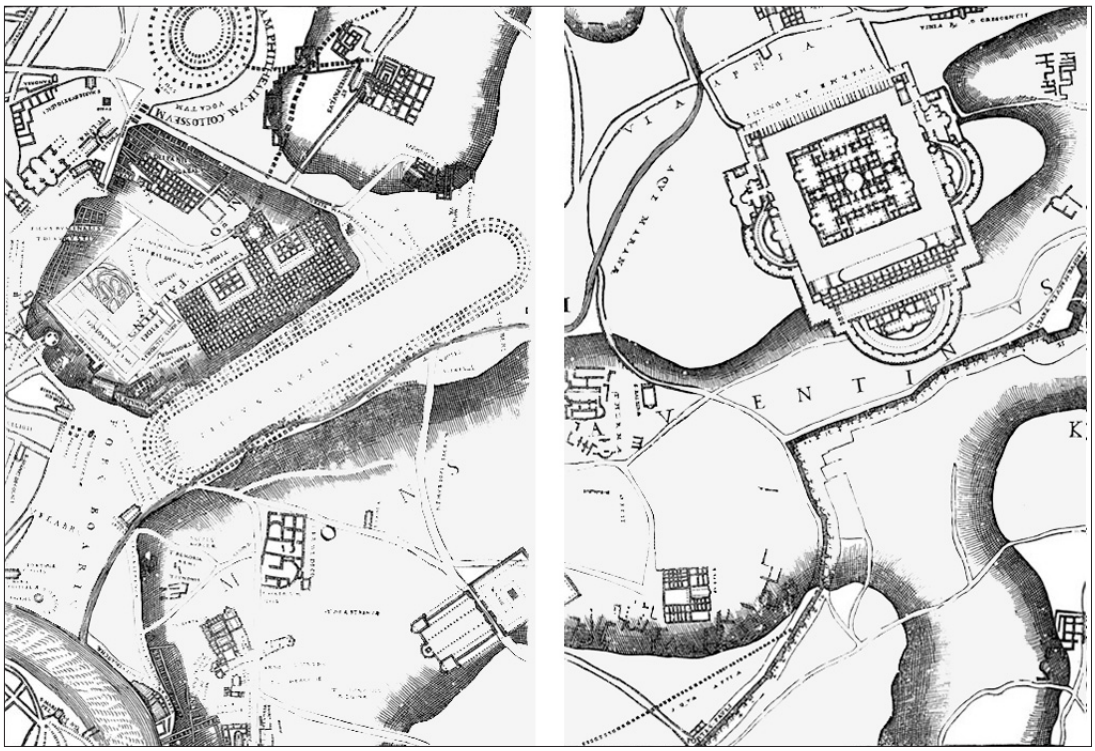
31 Sergio Stenti, *Housing in Italia*, 61.

32 Ibid., 63.

33 Mario Fiorentino, *La Casa*, 271.



Left: Ospice of San Michele a Ripa (which included, orphanage, ospice and jail for women), build at different phases between the 17th and 18th century, Rome.Right: Ferdinando Fuga, 'Manica Lunga', the south wing of the Quirinale palace in a view by Giuseppe Vasi, 1730s.



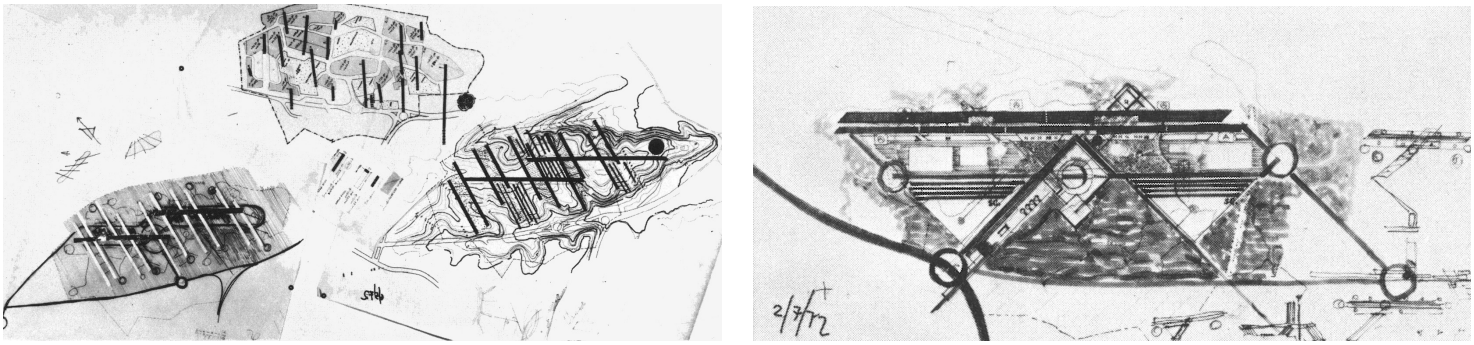
Left: Leonardo Bufalini, Plan of Rome, 1555. DetailS.

In introducing Corviale, Fiorentino made explicit reference to the long south wing of the Quirinale Palace built between the 16th and 18th century, and the palace of San Michele at Ripa, a multifunctional structure that contained an orphanage, hospice, and jail.34 Beside their scale, what characterized these artifacts is their linearity and the repetitive pattern of openings. These buildings show another kind of Baroque architecture in which austerity of form contrasts with Rome's dramatic landscape. It was precisely such austere large-scale baroque architecture that inspired the unique form of Corviale, in which the sheer volume of mass housing became a monumental urban artifact.

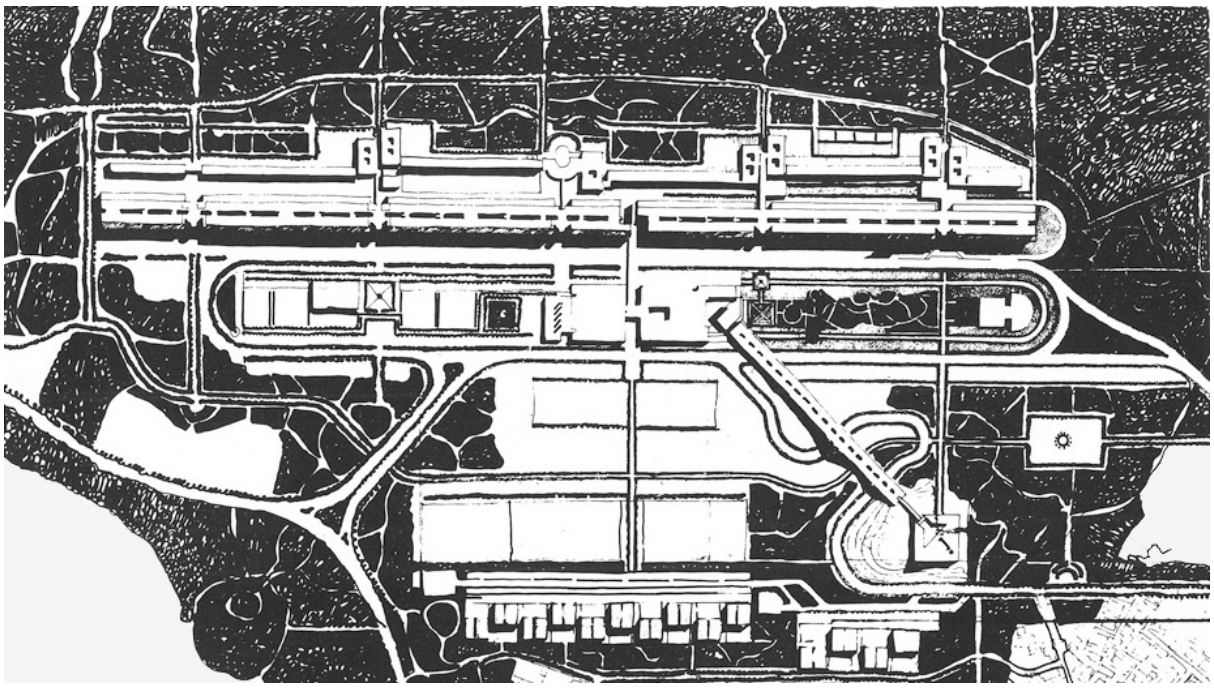
34 From the project report quoted in Rosalia Vittorini, "Reloaded Corviale, a City with a Single Building (1973–84). Mario Fiorentino Architect, Rome," in *Docomomo Journal* n. 54 (April 2016), 46.

A WALL MADE OF WALLS

The site of Corviale is located in proximity with the Via Portuense, at the very edge of the city. Because of the sheer size of the project—houses for 1,200 families to be built on 60 hectares of land—Fiorentino was tasked with the organization of a large team of architects and engineers. The team was divided into ten brigades, of which five were responsible for the design and were led by Fiorentino, Federico Gorio, Piero Maria Lugli, Giulio Sterbini, and Michele Valori, all architects with a long experience in designing housing (Gorio, Lugli, and Valori had worked with Fiorentino on the Tiburtino housing project). Unusually, the team did not follow the usual praxis of devising a general masterplan and then assigning each architect the design of one part. Instead, they worked together on all aspects of the project, imposing on themselves "the hardcore discipline of coordination," as Fiorentino himself put it.[35]



Left: Mario Fiorentino and collaborators., Early plans for Corviale, Spring/Summer 1972. At this stage Corviale was still conceived as made of several linear buildings. Right: Mario Fiorentino and collaborators., First plan for the linear 'monoblock' solution, dated 02-07-1972. This is the drawing that documents the team's decision to concentrate most of the housing program into a one-kilometer-long structure. From Mario Fiorentino, *La casa* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 1985), 341-342.

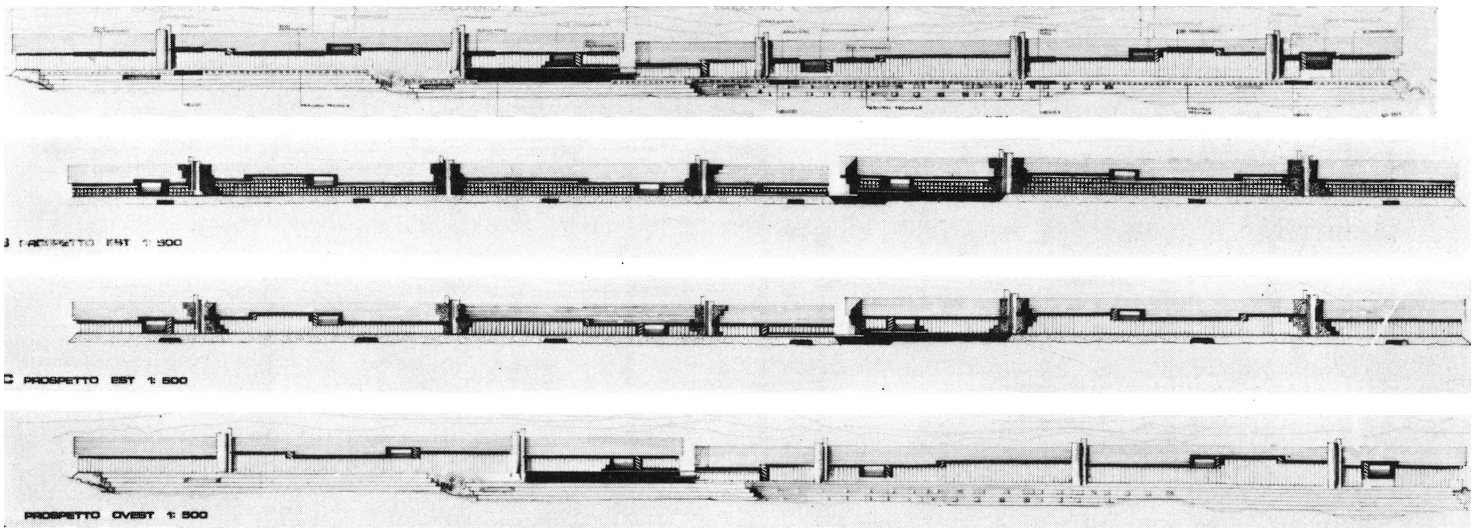


Mario Fiorentino and collaborators, General plan of Corviale, Rome, 1973. The plan of Corviale consists of four strips parallel to the main linear housing block. From below to bottom: 1st strip, low-rise housing, services and theatre; 2nd strip: Housing block and parking; 3rd strip, services that include civic center, church, sport facilities; 4th strip: subsided and cooperative housing. Additional social housing is located into the Linear structure placed at 45 degrees. The ground floor of this structure is a gallery that was meant to link the service strip with a shopping mall. Many of these programs and landscape features were not built when Corviale opened in 1981. From Mario Fiorentino, *La casa* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 1985), 389.

35 Mario Fiorentino, *La Casa*, 305.

It was this working method that prompted the solution of concentrating the whole program into a simple and unitary form. At first, Corviale was imagined as made of several linear buildings placed either parallel to each other or following the hilly topography. Fiorentino and his teammates were committed to a scheme in which every building would be the same, so that apartments would have the same orientation, views, and access to the public facilities evenly distributed across the settlement. Moreover, formal and typological simplification was also meant to ease the design and building process. Bringing these premises to their logical conclusion led the team to take the momentous decision to concentrate most of the housing program into one single linear structure one kilometer long. It is interesting to note that this move was suggested by Piero Maria Lugli, project leader at Corviale, architect, planner, and the son of the famous Roman archeologist Giuseppe Lugli.[36] Piero Maria Lugli was one of the most original and creative historians of Rome's urban form, and the fact that it was he who suggested to concentrate most of the housing into a large, linear artifact is significant because it reinforced the interpretation of Corviale as a form rooted in the history of the city. In his studies on Rome, Lugli emphasized how both Ancient Rome and its surrounding Agro were defined by a 'secret form' that acted as a virtual limit of the city.[37]

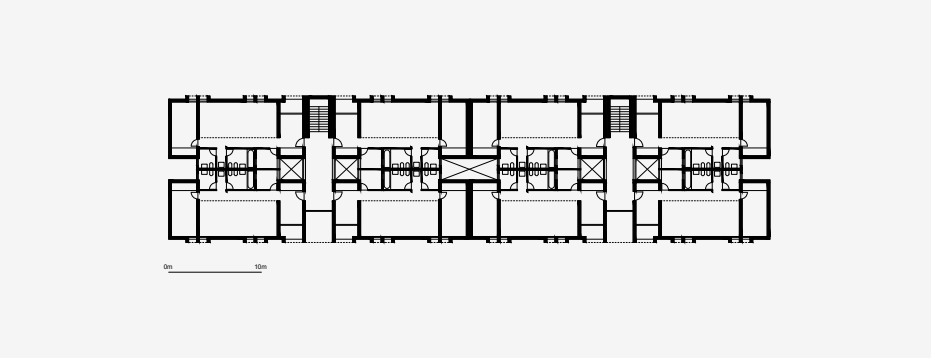
As mentioned earlier, Corviale is placed on the crest of a hill that still today is perceived as the very edge of the city. It may have been this exceptional location that suggested to Lugli the idea that the new housing could have been conceived as a wall evoking the very idea of limit. It was at this stage that Corviale assumed the monoblock form. Such form was both the logical consequence of Corviale's location as the limit, but also of the idea of the housing estate as a collective project in which every element is indissolubly defined by the whole. Another reason for the monoblock form came from the team's will to preserve as much of the existing landscape as possible, so that the building would be surrounded by a park. Once the decision to work with a linear structure was taken, all the other design moves followed consistently. The entire masterplan is organized as a sequence of strips parallel to the main housing structure. Each strip contains the different parts of the project, such as roads and public facilities. The only exception to the parallel strip principle was a smaller housing bar placed at forty-five degrees, whose ground-floor was meant to become a public passage leading to a shopping mall.



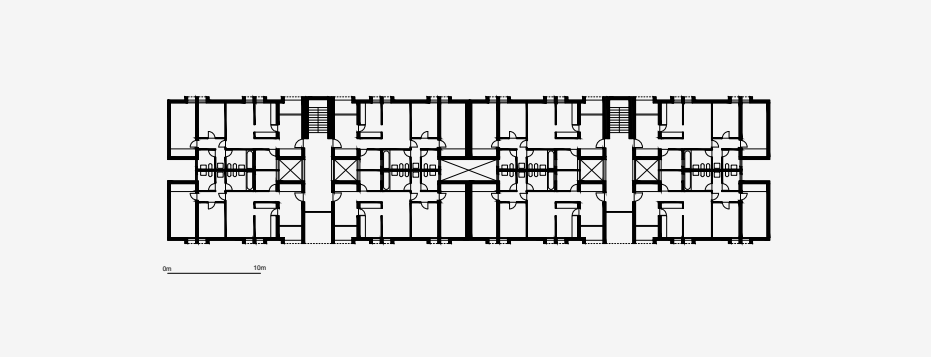
Mario Fiorentino and collaborators, Early studies for the façade, 1973. From Mario Fiorentino, *La casa* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 1985), 223.

36 Angelo Zaccone Teodosi, Elena D'Alessandri, "Corviale: la storia e il progetto," in *Corviale Domani. Dossier di ricerca per un distretto culturale* (Giugno 2011), Accessed on Mar 16, 2025, https://www.corvialedomani.it/wp-content/uploads/cap.1-Corviale-nel-contesto-urbano-e-paesaggistico.pdf.

37 Piero Maria Lugli, *L' agro romano e l' "altera" forma di Roma* (Rome: Gangemi Editore, 2006).



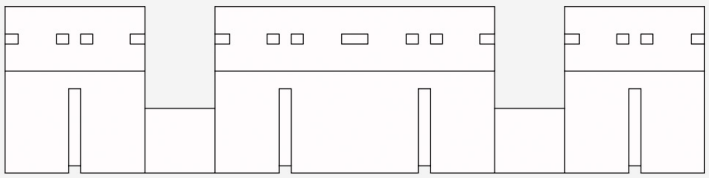
Mario Fiorentino, Giuseppe Cappelli, Francesco Sferra Carini, Design/build competition entry for a housing building at Spinaceto, Rome, 1977. Typical plan without room-subdivision.



Mario Fiorentino, Giuseppe Cappelli, Francesco Sferra Carini, Design/build competition entry for a housing building at Spinaceto, Rome, 1977. Typical plan. From Mario Fiorentino, *La casa* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 1985). Drawing by Romain Barth.

Because of the depth of the section, the linear structure is made of two rows of housing divided by a narrow shaft. Vertically, the rows are both divided into a lower and upper part, split by a floor dedicated to communal spaces (these were occupied illegally shortly after completion). The decision to have two linear buildings divided by a shaft dictated the linear configuration of the apartments, in which rooms are arranged in a row along the outer façade, while bathrooms, storage, and kitchens are aligned along the shaft.

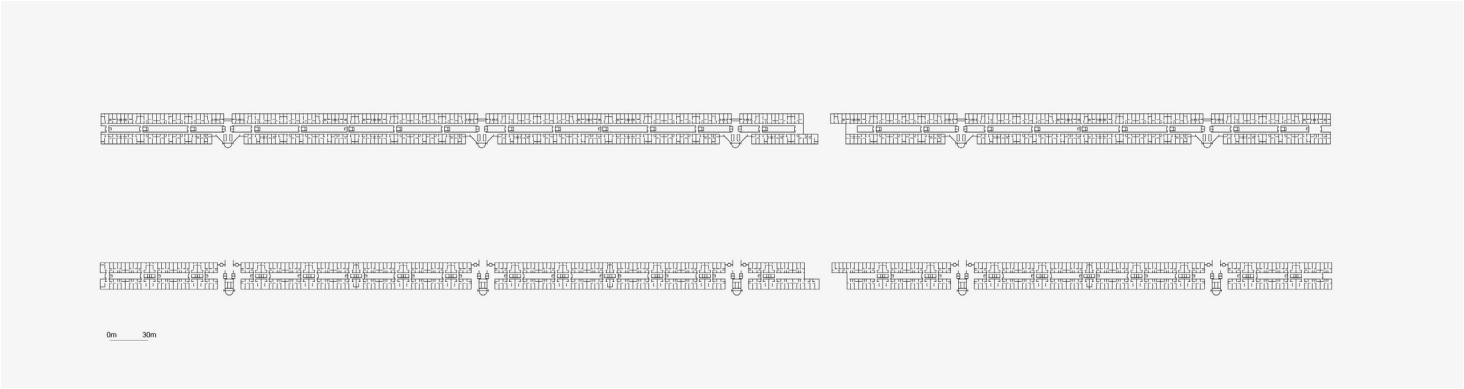
As we have seen, this solution evolved from the towers of Viale Etiopia and Pietralata but has also been explored in Fiorentino's project for a housing estate in the Tre Fontane district in Rome (1964–69). This project consists of circular structures made of two parallel rings, in which one-sided apartments are accessible from a roofless central void that contains the vertical circulation cores with staircases and elevators. In this way, all the units feature rooms linearly arranged along the outer facades and a row of services at the back, ventilated through the void. It is interesting to note that this solution was further explored by Fiorentino in his proposal for a prefabricated housing unit at Spinaceto (1977). In this proposal, on which he worked after Corviale, Fiorentino left the rooms open without subdivisions, suggesting that, because the fixed elements, such as bathrooms, are concentrated in the middle, the outer strip of the apartment could be arranged in a flexible way. This solution was already implicit in Corviale, whose typical plan can be summarized as a sequence of strips each containing one element: the shaft, the bathrooms/storage, the corridors, the rooms. Crucial to this solution is the shaft whose narrowness is at odds with the height of the building. This is perhaps the most problematic aspect of Corviale, especially because from the galleries that give access to apartments located in the top part of the building, the shaft looks like a deep and dark well. At the same time, this rather controversial solution makes sense if we keep in mind that the shafts are meant to offer mere ventilation, while all the rooms face a wide-open panorama unusual for social housing.



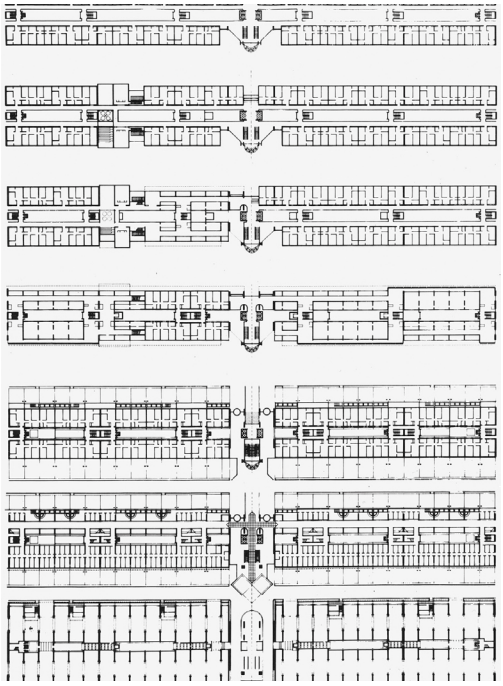
Mario Fiorentino, Giuseppe Cappelli, Francesco Sferra Carini, Design/build competition entry for a housing building at Spinaceto, Rome, 1977. Axonometric views. From Mario Fiorentino, *La casa* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 1985), 280.Drawing by Marson Korbi.

Consistent with the linear arrangement of the apartments, the structure takes the form of a sequence of load-bearing walls placed at 6m intervals. This structural solution, known in Italian as *campata strutturale* (structural bay), is a recurring principle in many social housing buildings built in Italy in the 1970s. At Corviale the structural bay was adopted to facilitate complete prefabrication (an aspiration that was frustrated by the realization, in which many elements were cast in place). Corviale is therefore a building-as-wall made entirely of walls.

The structural system is partially hidden behind the façade, whose architecture is defined by the binary sequence of precast panels and ribbon windows. Only through the windows is possible to see the cadence of the walls which, together with the metal sheets that cover the parking roof, are the only vertical elements within a façade dominated by horizontal lines. This horizontality is drastically interrupted by the gates that define the access to the five sections of the entire linear structure. The gates are visible on the façade in the form of massive semi-cylinders that look like the shafts of a gigantic order. Their presence introduces, within the radical abstraction of Corviale, a sense of epic monumentality without being didactic. Indeed, what is striking about Corviale is the radical anonymity of the architecture, the absence of any features that are not the elements that build the system. Everything is reduced to its essence of partition, staircase, balcony, and window. Everything is consequential, nothing deviates from the logic of the whole. By making uniform the entire architecture of the complex into a repetitive system composed of few and identical elements, Fiorentino and his teammates hoped that the housing agency would grant the contract to only one construction company, thus avoiding the fragmentation typical of large building sites in Italy. Fiorentino went in the opposite direction of his mentor Ridolfi, who, as we have seen, sublimated the backwardness of the building site as an opportunity to save high-skilled craftmanship within modern construction. Corviale was instead conceived as a stimulus for the industrialization of construction, in which a nearby factory would have produced all the elements to be assembled in situ. In this way, builders would no longer work in small crews, but as large-scale companies, a tendency supported by the unions and the Italian Communist Party. This modus operandi did not work out as planned, since for political reasons the housing agency granted construction work to several independent companies. In spite of these flaws, the form of Corviale was the last attempt to push the abstraction of modern architecture to its logical conclusion in order to demystify housing from any association beyond its use value as housing.



Mario Fiorentino and collaborators, Housing at Corviale, Rome, 1972-81. Typical plans of the linear housing building, upper floors (top) lower floors (below). Drawing by Romain Barth.



Mario Fiorentino and collaborators, Housing at Corviale, Rome, 1972-1981. Typical plans. From the bottom: parking, ground floor, vertical cores apartments, communal spaces floor, gallery apartments.

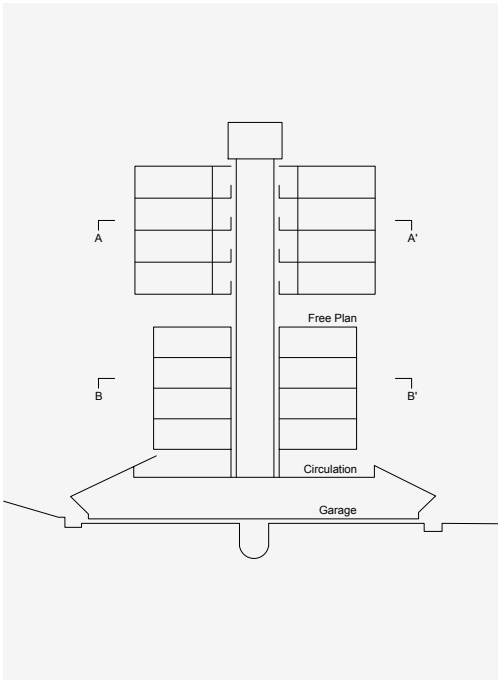
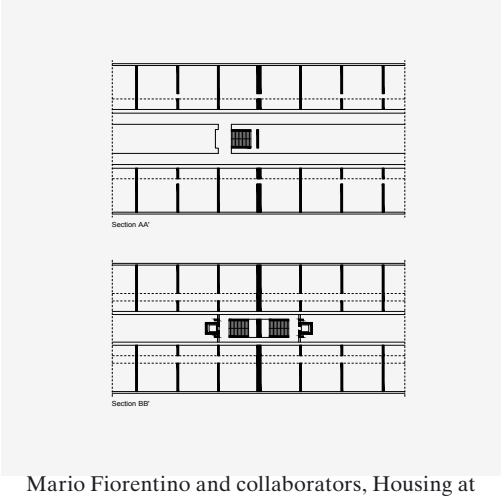
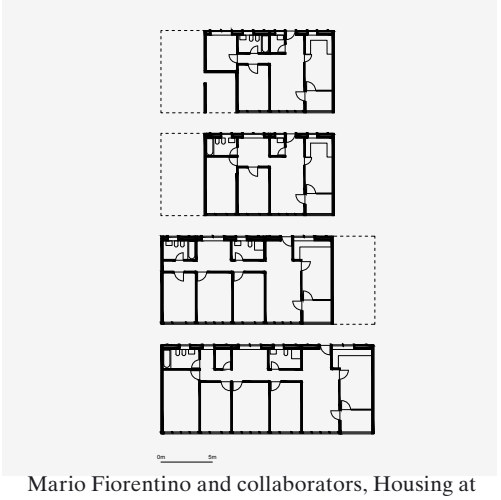


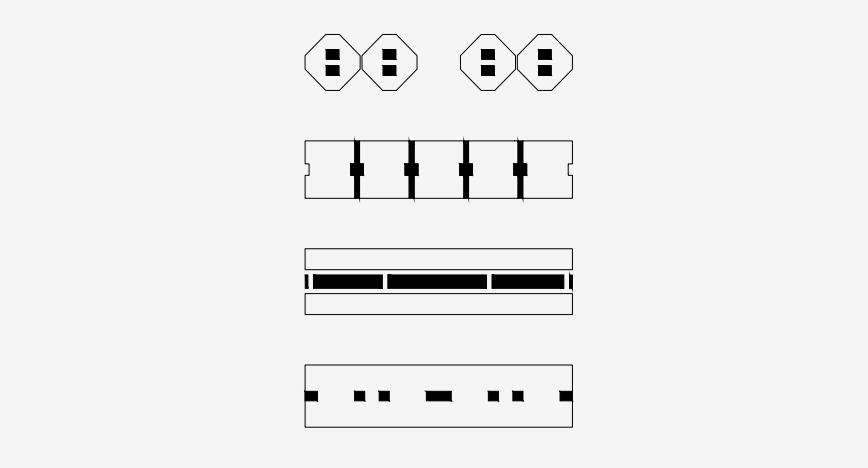
Diagram showing circulation and load-bearing structure.Drawing by Romain Barth.



Mario Fiorentino and collaborators, Housing at Corviale, Rome, 1972-1981. Diagram showing circulation and load-bearing structure. Vertical core apartments (below), gallery apartments (top). Drawing by Romain Barth.



Mario Fiorentino and collaborators, Housing at Corviale, Rome, 1972-1981. Plans of the apartments. Drawing by Romain Barth.



Housing types and the ventilation shaft. A comparative analysis of four housing projects by Mario Fiorentino: Viale Etiopia, Petralata, Corviale and Spinaceto.
Drawing by Romain Barth.

And yet even within its radical abstraction, the block retains its solemnity as a monument. It is precisely the combination of repetition and monumentality that both radicalizes and twists the traditional form of social housing. Since its origins in Victorian England, repetition and austerity were the key formal characters of housing for the 'laboring classes.'[38] Austerity of form was meant to remind to the inhabitants that social housing was not better than what workers could buy in the market once they could afford it. It was this idea of housing that Fiorentino and his teammates both radicalized and criticized. For them, social housing had to express in the most honest and brutal terms housing as an infrastructure for the largest number of people. Yet, by concentrating all the program in one unitary form, the building exceeds its role as infrastructure and becomes a monumental form that celebrates housing as the primary form of the city.

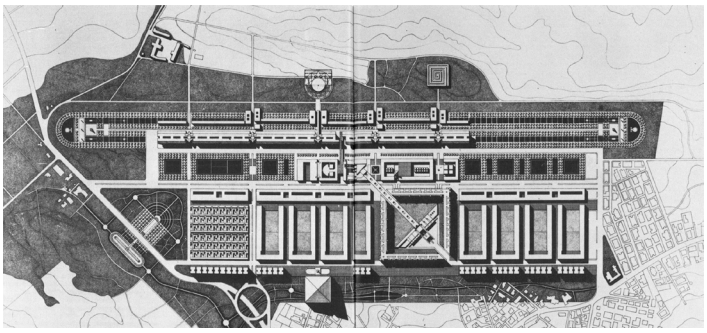
The President of the italian Republic Sergio Mattarella at the inauguration of a social football field in Corviale, in Roman suburb. Photo by Roberto Nistri.

38 Irina Davidovici, "The Depth of the Street," in *AA Files, no. 70* (2015), 103–123.
On the issue of austerity and the origins of social housing see: Theodora Giovanazzi, "Poverty and Architecture: The Fuggerei as an Early Example of Affordable Housing," in *Burning Farm*: "Poverty and Architecture: The Fuggerei as an Early Example of Affordable Housing," *Burning Farm* no. 1 (October 2023), Accessed on Mar 16, 2025, *burning.farm/essays/poverty-and-architecture*.

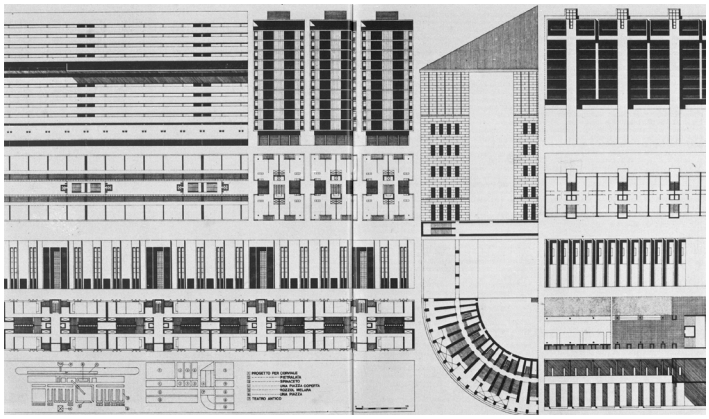
CORVIALE EXPANDED

In 1979, while Corviale was under construction, Fiorentino revisited the project and proposed its expansion. He inscribed the sequence of strips into a larger system of 'axes and poles' that makes the entire estate look like a Baroque garden.[39] In a manner similar to Roma Est, Fiorentino conceived his project as a collage of ready-made architectures, like his competition entry for a covered square in Ancona (1978), Le Corbusier's Museum of Unlimited Growth (1939), the Ancient Roman Theatre drawn by Andrea Palladio for Daniele Barbaro's translation of Vitruvius's *De Architectura Libri Decem* (1567), and Leon Krier's project for a covered square presented in his plan for *Roma Interrotta* (1978). There were also Fiorentino's housing projects for Pietralata and Spinaceto and Celli's and Tognon's housing at Rozzol Melara. In a way, this proposal was also an opportunity for Fiorentino to take stock of his research on housing by showing the typological continuity across his projects. Even in this expanded version of Corviale, Fiorentino retained the linear logic, and all the new buildings are placed parallel to the one-kilometer linear structure. The proposal for a new Corviale was thus the opportunity to reinforce the original principle while increasing its dimensions.

However, as Purini noted, Fiorentino's revisitation of Corviale was a correction of his own scheme.[40] In this new version, Corviale was no longer an isolated element but part of a larger ensemble. Rather than a large-scale monument, in the new version, Corviale was a vast citadel made by blocks and gardens which can be understood as a softening of the original idea. What is odd about this proposal is that Fiorentino imagined this expansion when it may have become clear to him and his collaborators that it was unlikely that the social housing agency would be able to build the plethora of social services planned in the original project.



Mario Fiorentino, Corviale revisited, 1979.
From Mario Fiorentino, *La casa* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 1985). 298-299.



Mario Fiorentino, Corviale revisited, 1979. From top to bottom, left to right: Corviale, 1972-1981; Spinaceto housing, 1977; Pietralata Housing, 1963-65; Leon Krier, covered square (from 'Roma Interrotta'), 1978; Ancient Roman Theatre according to Vitruvius; Carlo Celli, Luciano Celli, Dario Tognon, Rozzol Mellara Housing block, Trieste, 1971-82; Mario Fiorentino, competition entry for a covered square in Ancona 1978.
From Mario Fiorentino, *La casa* (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 1985), 301.

39 Mario Fiorentino, *La Casa*.

40 Franco Purini, "Correzioni per un Chilometro," in Richard Plunz, Anna Irene del Monaco, Lucio Barbera (editors), *Corviale Accomplished. Uno studio per Corviale. Funzione e Disfunzione dell'edilizia sociale,* 562.

Max Weber famously argued that in order to achieve the possible it is necessary to try the impossible. Perhaps Fiorentino's proposal to expand Corviale was a reminder that a large-scale housing block is a city on its own and, as such, it requires a vast program of services, something that was paramount in the original project. By now it has become evident that the 'failure' of many large-scale housing estates was due to the fact that the planned services—retail, sport facilities, community centers, workspaces—were often not realized. This happened because social agencies often gave priority to the building of housing and did not have a sound financial strategy to support any extras. For this reason, the only way to improve Corviale—or any project of this kind—would be to complete it according to its original plan. Fiorentino and his teammates imagined a structure in which inhabitants would live in apartments but would also use generous communal spaces disseminated through the building. In the last twenty years, after the hypothesis of demolition has been abandoned, there have been several attempts to propose projects of transformation.[41]

However, if there is anything urgent to do at Corviale, it is not its transformation, but its maintenance. The most important project for Corviale, missing in the original scheme, is a reasonable strategy of how the municipality, social housing agency, and the residents can coordinate the maintenance of the public spaces. This goes against the fragmentation in governance that has plagued social housing in Italy from the beginning of its history. A new project of maintenance would require the plethora of stakeholders to learn the "hard-core discipline of coordination" that the architects of Corviale imposed on themselves. For the rest, Corviale should remain as it is: a large house, that by virtue of its scale, acts as a reminder that housing is still the most urgent social need and the most important task for architecture. And this was precisely what Fiorentino's work was about: a relentless commitment to the project of housing.

41 Among these projects is important to remember the competition Rigenerare Corviale organized by ATER, the social housing agency that currently manages the complex, in collaboration with the Regione Lazio. The winning scheme presented by Laura Peretti is an intelligent proposal to solve some of the critical aspects of the original structure but remains vague in terms of how the public spaces can be managed and maintained. For more information, see https://www.romatoday.it/zone/arvalia/corviale/progetto-riqualificazione-urbana-corviale.html.

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