



Corviale, Residential Public Housing Unit by Mario Fiorentino, Rome 1984.

Architecture versus Occupants, the case of Corviale

DIANE YVONNE FRANCIS GHIRARDO¹

Abstract: Dan Solomon's study can be considered a deep skepticism about the very principles that unfortunately still animate architectural education today. The culture of the architectural expert and the embrace of a design process of impenetrable mystery accessible only to the practitioners constitute the very basic premise upon which architectural education rests today. Dan offers some troubling examples from the United States, but he also considers others from Paris and from Rome.

Daniel Solomon's leadership in housing and urbanism spans half a century – a remarkable accomplishment, especially because he constructed his accomplishments in the face of a dominant, domineering and ruthlessly powerful opponent: the Modern Movement. Dan confronts this powerful entity head on throughout his book, but the finegrained exercise of that power might still not be obvious outside of the world of architecture. It includes the end of year student presentations where faculty and professionals excoriate students for not hewing to a rigid modernist line; the criticism leveled by faculty during the course of the semester if a student dares to stray from a rigid modernist (or parametric) design; the broad refusal of the architecture community, through its institutions as well as through architectural criticism, to recognize, reward or promote any approach that departs from the approved lines. Although such self-censorship dates from early in the 20th century, it persists. I periodically ask students in my theory classes what would

1. Diane Ghirardo: BA, San Jose State University; MA, History and Humanities, Stanford University, 1976; PhD, History and Humanities, Stanford University, 1983. Ghirardo's books include *Building New Communities. New Deal America and Fascist Italy* (1989); *Out of Site: A Social Criticism of Architecture* (1992); Mark Mack. *A California Architect* (1994); *Architecture After Modernism* (1996), translated into multiple languages and editions; *Dopo il Sogno. Architettura e città nell'America di oggi* (2008); Aldo Rossi. *Drawings* (with Germano Celant, 2008); Aldo Rossi and the *Spirit of Architecture* (Yale 2019). Her forthcoming books include *Le Lettere di Lucrezia Borgia* (2020). She also translated Aldo Rossi's *Architecture of the City* (1982). Former President of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA, 1993-6), member of the National Architectural Accreditation Board (NAAB, 2003-6), and executive editor of the *Journal of Architectural Education* (1988-99); email: ghirardo@usc.edu.

happen if they presented projects in their studios which included historical references. A round of laughter routinely greets such an outlandish idea. Likewise, during studio reviews, when students are asked about the eventual users, particularly for housing, or for apartments, they spell out how the future occupants are meant to act. To a question about the involvement of future occupants in the design of their communities, let alone their apartments, the typical response is a puzzled frown.

In this, my response to *Love versus Hope*, there are two parallel matters I would like to explore. The first is a direct elaboration of what Dan identified as Hope, and that which he identified as exemplary of Love. Let me begin with my own experience of both when I teach history/theory classes during USC's spring program in Italy, where I normally bring students to various 20th century housing projects in Rome. Because they often rent apartments in Testaccio, they enthuse over the community, the cafes, the shops, the clubs, the apartments, the district's walkability, not to mention the compelling presence of the ancient mound of potshards (Monte Testaccio). A visit to Corviale, on the other hand, triggers quite different responses. Dan writes about the long blocks of modernist slabs erected in cities around the world and into which were crammed low-income tenants, with disastrous results. Among the examples he illustrates are Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, Hunter's Point in San Francisco, and Jordan Downs in Los Angeles. Though he acknowledges that each case is more nuanced than it might at first appear, nonetheless, when all is said and done, the evidence of the complete failure of the modernist vision of urbanism and housing is more than evident. Jane Jacobs eloquently demolished it nearly 60 years ago, not primarily on aesthetic grounds, but on the principles and assumptions which underlay it. It isn't necessary to repeat her critique here, because Dan's book impressively demonstrates his grasp of the very same problems.

What perhaps emerges from Dan's study most eloquently is a deep skepticism about the very principles that unfortunately still animate architectural education today.

The culture of the architectural expert and the embrace of a design process of impenetrable mystery accessible only to the practitioners constitute the very basic premise upon which architectural education rests today. Dan offers some troubling examples from the United States, but he also considers others from Paris and from Rome.

The Villaggio Olimpico for the 1960 Olympics in Rome perfectly illustrates the tedious, poorly maintained, yawning and desolate landscapes of an ideal modernist housing project. On the other hand, he pardons Ludovico Quaroni's Casilino project of 1972, organized along the same principles, because of the skill and elegance of architectural elements. This is not a new argument. In 2001, I accompanied an AIA tour group to visit Corviale (1972-1982), a kilometer long, nine story housing project designed by a group led by Mario Fiorentino on the far southwestern edge of Rome. Here too both the American and Italian architects present on the tour waxed enthusiastic about some of the architectural details that summoned references to the ideas of the yet-to-be deposed God of twentieth century architecture, Charles Jeanneret, detto Le Corbusier. The tour group neither spoke with residents nor the priest who lives in one of the apartments to learn how they felt about living in what is disparaged as the Serpentone (the Giant Snake). The visiting architects could only see the architecture, not the culture, not the society, not the hardships. How this monstrosity came about constitutes the very core of what Dan identified in some of the U.S. based projects. Fiorentino evidently sought a governing idea around which to erect what he defined as "experimental" housing for 6000 people. He drew inspiration, he reported, from Rome's ancient and long abandoned aqueducts along the city's eastern periphery, long, high and beautifully built to supply the city with fresh water. Who could imagine an aqueduct as an ideal setting for housing?

Immigrants from southern Italy, people evicted from their apartments, that's who.

In the years after World War II new arrivals and other emarginated groups began to erect shanties attached to the piers of the Aqueduct Felice in the Tuscolana district, shanties that became progressively more permanent. For the most part, manual laborers and women who worked as domestics fabricated the shacks, and most survived in part because they paid no rent. Served by a famous and much loved priest who moved into one of the shanties and also operated a school, don Roberto Sardelli, the residents formed a community with its own standards and controls. The notion that one could employ the imagery of an aqueduct to erect public housing as at Corviale did not, however, include the self-built housing of the sort found at the park of the aqueducts. After decades, the city began to ruthlessly dispossess the residents of their homes from the 1970s onward.

The idea that one could use that form, that long abandoned aqueduct, as the basis for an architect-designed project – now that was a great idea. Except it wasn't.

Those forced to live there, isolated on a hill with a view of the distant city from one side, struggled for decades to get the 774 elevators to work (most did not, and did not for decades), to obtain the promised shops, to obtain access to decent and regular public transit. In the absence of these basic necessities Corviale became, almost immediately, a high profile slum from which residents sought to flee as soon as they could. Unlike those living adjacent to the Aqueduct Felice, at Corviale residents even had to pay rent to stay in this quasi-aqueduct.

Architects defend the architecture and blame the city for not providing the relevant services. When I asked the AIA group and the Italian architects whether they would move in to Corviale, not surprisingly, the question was met with silence.

That silence points to more fundamental problems, those to which Dan refers and that lie at the heart of these issues, and which lead to the second line of thought I want to probe. Architects experiment with forms, geometries, homages to earlier architect-heroes, in cities and in housing projects with supreme indifference to those who will one day live there.

Nothing brings this home as poignantly as the reaction of my students when they visit Corviale. By contrast with the tour group, the students meet with residents and with the priest to hear about their experiences. They try to ride the non-functioning elevators, they visit the empty 'communal spaces' Fiorentino's group designed, they suffer the bleak, irregular public transit, they stroll the long, empty halls and gaze down at the vacant spaces between the wings, and they note the absence of visible life, whether on a weekday or a weekend and despite Corviale housing nearly 6000 people.

The most consistent response is a demoralized reflection on how everything that they learned in their housing studio is a resounding, absolute failure at Corviale. One former student, now a studio instructor, reported that the visit to Corviale changed her life. The experience opens the possibility for broaching questions: how could architects believed to be highly competent get things so wrong? And how is it possible that the lessons have not been learned, when the evidence is so visible and so compelling?

Big questions, and Dan opens up some of the issues as he reports on how students at Harvard's Graduate School of Design learn about architectural theory. Taught by K. Michael Hays, the course quickly moves to install the theories of early twentieth century thinkers such as Sigfried Giedion and Theodor Adorno. Students read Adorno's essays on modern music, where he excoriated jazz, disparaged the mix of historicism and classicism in Igor Stravinsky and celebrated Arnold Schönberg's disagreeable dissonance and abstraction as a true expression of the modern spirit. In short, everything that is popular or agreeable is disparaged as populist and ignorant, while everything that is dense, disagreeable, unpleasant and abstract is truly modern. Standing outside this closed system, I can only wonder why a theory such as that of Adorno, predicated on misery and joylessness, should serve as a basis for architectural production. Adorno, one should remember, escaped the Holocaust by fleeing to America and in particular to Pacific Palisades, where he proved unable to enjoy the beautiful weather, the powerful Pacific Ocean, his freedom and the vibrant music scene (yes, jazz); instead he huddled miserably among other refugees while propounding his particularly bleak world views.

The architectural version of this is the notion of architectural autonomy, where form dominates everything, content is marginal, and deference to human needs is, to say the least, minimal. Corviale perfectly articulates this view. One wonders why Adorno (and Hays) get to make such rules, and more importantly, why anyone has to follow them. The position and prominence of the two leads them to be celebrated by cohorts who share the same views and who grant them what can only be described as a dubious authority. Hays' version of these grim theories serves as a convenient surrogate for social, political and even cultural engagement. In this world, the battles are conducted on pages of turgid prose and often inchoate thought rather than on the ground, in the battle to erect ecologically sound buildings or to design decent housing for all classes. It is, in short, almost criminal in its indifference to the world in which we live.

That such views continue to be promulgated in this day is nothing short of amazing. Cheers to Dan for exposing in great detail the profound shortcomings of this way of understanding architecture while proposing an alternative path forward for architecture.