Complaint as Action in the Corviale at Rome

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Abstract

Uncountable stories reveal details about how people live, struggle and make sense of their everyday life at the Corviale in the outskirts of Rome. Through a research project that positions maintenance as a cultural practice and not merely a technical one, this paper focuses on alliances, conflicts and contradictions found in the complex ecology of maintaining a building. By focusing on microhistories, and in spite of the monumental size of the case study, the project purposely situates itself in the field of minor architecture, where care practices and personal details are seen as subversive alternatives to grand narratives and actions that are currently at odds with the actual needs of community.

1000 meters long, nine story high, Corviale is a social concrete housing project built between 1975 and 1984 and designed by Mario Fiorentino together with a team of more than 20 architects in the periphery of Rome. The big serpent, as it is called, meant to accommodate 8.500 inhabitants in order to respond to an enormous housing crisis. Between the mid 1930s and the early 1960s Rome doubled its population from over a million to two. The urban expansion during the post-war period, driven by an enormous housing shortage, was managed mainly by the interests of large landowners, namely aristocratic families, the Church and some new real-estate companies, whose speculative interests prevailed over the public needs. The developments were based on the 1931 master plan (with its 1942 variant), even though it was apparent that this plan had not been conceived to encompass such an enormous growth. Consequently, the city's expansion was managed by an avalanche of additional smaller plans, resulting in a fragmented urban patchwork rather than a holistic approach. To fight the housing crisis, the government had been implementing a national plan to build houses for workers between 1949-63. And yet, in 1968, over 60.000 people still lived in illegally built shacks and makeshift homes in Rome's poorest suburbs (Insolera, Berdini, 2024). Entire neighborhoods were constructed without any proper infrastructure such as roads, sewage, water supply, electricity and public facilities (Caudo, 2022). In 1964, PEEP, a plan for Economic and Social Housing was developed and from 1969 to 1989, the largest public housing program ever seen in Italy was carried out in Rome. It started at a moment of social and political tumult: major industrial unions protested against high rents and demanded the workers' right to adequate housing. Negotiations between the government and the trade unions resulted in the Law 865/1971, a housing law that set in motion what architect and urbanist Giovanni Caudo calls "the twenty-year golden age of public housing in Italy." (Caudo, 2022: 1-20).

By the time Corviale came into being, there were still close to 400.000 people living in 84 illegal settlements in highly precarious conditions (Insolera, Berdini, 2024). To face the problems arising from this explo-

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sive unregulated urban expansion, Mario Fiorentino, Ludovico Quaroni, Vincio Delleani, Riccardo Morandi, Lucio and Vicenzo Passarelli formed Studio Asse in 1967. The goal of their collective was first and foremost to conduct an independent, multidisciplinary research to analyze the parameters of the urban expansion of Rome's historical city towards the east and address it with a distinct urban form. Their research resulted in the design of *Asse Attrezzato*, an integrated urban axis including state and private institutions, roads and other services for the eastern part of Rome. The idea was to redevelop the working-class neighborhoods, to initiate the decentralization of large services and at the same time leave the historic center untouched from further urban development. Despite its promising ambitions, the axis never came into being and Studio Asse dissolved in 1971.

A complex reality
Corviale must be understood within Fiorentino's experiences with Studio Asse on the one hand and Rome's fragile socio-political context on the other. With the design of the 1 km long, 9 stories high building, the architects made a strong statement defined by a distinct form. The edifice acts like a dividing line between the sprawling urban periphery and the Roman landscape towards the sea, trying to refer "to the characteristics of the site and reinforce the landscape dimension of the urban" (Caudo 2022, 105). Accessible by motorized transport and at the same time surrounded by a luscious landscape, the architects aimed to offer the working class what was missing in the historical city. Adjunct to the main building, a lower complex was arranged in a 45-degree angle, easily accessible for elderly and persons with specific challenges. The 4th floor of the large complex was foreseen as an interior street with shops for daily use. Both volumes were crossed by an axis accommodating social infrastructure such as schools, playgrounds, a library, open air theater, facilities for leisure and sports. To guarantee affordable housing in a rather short period of time, Corviale relied on a prefabricated concrete building system. The complex is a testimony of a time, where architects believed in a progressive development of history, driven by continuous economic growth. They understood architecture mainly as the production of

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static objects and believed to solve the housing problems of the poor and rising middle class through mass production and industrialization.

As many other projects of its time, Corviale never turned out as the architects imagined it. The rich landscape never came into being, variations in the façade as well as a colorful interior signaling system did not materialize. Already before completion, the 4th floor was squatted and taken over by over 100 individuals and families, who established themselves in it permanently and contributed to the failing of infrastructural services such as elevators, lights in communal spaces, etc. This was one of the many reasons that led to an exceeding budget with the consequence that many of the planned services never came into being. Looking back almost 50 years, Corviale's lifetime, despite its strong presence reveals a history and present of complex fragility.

The problems Corviale poses are emblematic for many European social housing complexes of the post-war era. The deterioration of building materials and technological installations, as well as poor energy performance combined with social problems, have once again put them in the center of the current architectural debates. Most often, entire housing estates get torn down, people get displaced and social networks destroyed in order to make space for more profitable investment projects. Despite the ethical issues such measurements imply, in a period of climate crisis and scarcity of resources, it becomes increasingly irresponsible to tear these structures down for yet another seemingly more profitable building project. For the remaining ones, architects, urban planners, building engineers, energy experts try to get their hands on the concrete urges these buildings pose, by solving first and foremost some of their technical, energetic and economic problems. However, they often fail to get to the heart of the problem, which is an understanding of a building NOT as a fixed form or a merely technical issue, but as a multilayered social construct. Today, 4.500 people from more than 20 countries, not without struggle, live in Corviale. Some of them legitimately, some under precarious conditions. ATER the institution owning and administrating Corviale as well as many other social housing states in Rome's periphery, reports that a significant percentage of

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tenants live there illegally and neither pay rent, nor the bills for utilities. This is often presented as one of the reasons for the absence of building maintenance. Chipped off concrete surfaces exposing rusted reinforcement, water leaks, broken elevators, traces of vandalism and negligence in several areas make the gigantic complex appear like a colossal fragile entity. If the current status of a broken world articulates itself through failures of modernist architecture, it cannot find an example that is clearer than this. The situation of Corviale recalls Steven Jackson's discussion on Shipbreaking by Edward Burtynsky's photo series picturing the wreck of a huge tank and a large number of people cannibalizing the stranded vessel for its (material and technological) parts in Bangladesh. By using the example of this shipwreck, Jackson invites us to ponder upon "what happens when we take erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, progress and innovation as our starting points in thinking" (Jackson, 2014: 224-229). Rather than understanding Corviale as a building that failed, can we think of the countless initiatives of physical as well as conceptual repair as a case of architecture as a verb? And how can we approach repair that goes beyond the pure technical and material failures?

Indeed at Corviale, there are currently multiple institutional, community based as well as individual activities of care, repair and maintenance. But much like in the tower of Babel biblical story, lack and faulty communication often gets in the way of coherent and well-organized actions. Architect Heidi Svenningsen Kajita's work, researching the history and transformation of welfare state public housing in the Global North, elucidates how in the case of post-war social housing, design decisions at the time were based on the collective organization of everyday functions to ease domestic tasks and, in turn, free up residents' time for paid work and leisurely activities (Kajita, 2023). Thus, the social ordering of space was aimed to contribute to capital production. What happens though, when this logic fails? This contribution looks at tenant complaints and how design expertise can be reorientated by engaging social aspirations of the users often ignored or considered to be useless. Through three microhistories centered around building components and inhabitants' complaints, this

article offers contested views of ongoing issues that intend to position practices of maintenance not just as technical operations but cultural and political acts. We do this by building on Svennignsen's argument that complaints are both, "a venue for an emancipatory political project and a tangled path not easily integrated into utilitarian, professionalized workflows" (Kajita, 2024).

Trouble with the Elevator, or, pushing the wrong buttons

"Elevators don't work, they break all the time!"
Tenant complaint at Corviale

In the 1987 horror film *The Lift* – later remade as *Down* in 2001 – Dutch filmmaker Dick Maas portrays the elevator as a mysterious black box that, after human experimentation with biochips, develops a deadly will of its own. The movie reflects on the tangled and often fraught relationship between humans and machines. Small technical glitches – an error in a bar's cash register, a broken office computer, a malfunctioning bell – trigger escalating conflicts that underscore how invisible and complex the technology we rely on really is.
Reflecting on the difference between activation and production, physicist Julius Robert von Mayer noted in an 1876 lecture that "there is absolutely no quantitative relationship between cause and effect" (Bernard, 2014: 167). Pressing a button has no straightforward link to the physical movements and forces that make a machine work. Gone are the days when elevators required operators to oversee their movement.
The push-button replaced personnel costs but increased the complexity and expense of installation. Yet, push buttons "deny us insight into how a technical apparatus functions" (Bernard, 2014: 174). When a button stops working, the resulting confusion and frustration can provoke impatience, anger, and even violence. Moreover, pushing the wrong buttons – both literally and metaphorically – can trigger unforeseen problems and prolong malfunction.
At Corviale, 74 elevators have been a source of tension for nearly 50 years. Even before construction was completed, squatters on the 4th floor illegally tapped

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Fig. 4 - Window solution by Angelo Scamponi at his apartment. Photo by Morten Krogsholm (2023).

into the electrical supply, causing overloads. As both the building and its population have aged since 1984, elevators have become vital but also increasingly unreliable, especially for elderly tenants.

According to ATER, the agency responsible for maintenance, the elevators frequently break down, most often due to vandalism. This attribution to deliberate destruction has become a convenient excuse to delay repairs. As a result, many residents avoid or are unable to leave their apartments. Trash is often thrown from windows, and dogs are walked on semi-public balconies where they leave excrement.

A pervasive feeling of insecurity, especially when using elevators at night, only worsens the situation. Ater's reductive approach illustrates the push-button problem of invisibility: they treat elevator failures as isolated technical faults without addressing the root cause – a deep sense of abandonment felt by the

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community after years of slow, careless institutional response. This neglect has contributed to unauthorized occupation in some cases and tenant frustration, which sometimes manifests as vandalism.

Drawing on Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, the purely technical repair of malfunctioning elevators will always fall short if it focuses solely on the machinery. The problem must be understood as a complex assemblage of human activity, social dynamics, materials, and knowledge. Like in Maas's film, the elevators have taken on a life of their own – embodying residents' frustration and institutional neglect. Yet amid this, grassroots initiatives – mostly led by women – resist through acts of care and pride. In several sections of the building, informal neighborhoods have formed, where residents voluntarily – and at their own expense – maintain elevators and shared spaces. Simple interventions, such as decorating

elevator doors with tiles and adding plants to waiting areas and corridors, help transform the environment. These areas are cleaned regularly, plants flourish, and elevators function more reliably.

Embodying the Neapolitan saying, *La vita è nu muzzico, va' e pigliatello!* ("Life is a bite, so go and get it!"), these self-organized efforts stand as powerful examples of resilience and care – lessons institutional power would do well to learn from and support.

Through the looking glass

"You're giving us new windows… what about fixing the heating system first?!"
Tenant complaint at Corviale

Jedediah Britton-Purdy writes: "To be human is to shape the world, to create the infrastructure of our common lives. What do we do when that infrastructure becomes a trap?" (Britton-Purdy, 2018).

On November 23, 2023, Roberta posted on Corviale Social, a local Facebook page, that her apartment was freezing and the radiators weren't working. A city councilor for Rome's District IX, Alberto Belloni, replied that he had already contacted ATER, the public housing agency. By January 9, the heating still hadn't been fixed. "This happens because some people don't pay," Silvia argued online. "So ATER cuts services. It's always the good people who suffer. Do inspections!"

Around 10–15% of Corviale remains informally occupied by residents who pay neither rent nor utilities. Because billing isn't individually metered, nonpayment has no direct consequence – only deepening frustration among compliant tenants when services fail. Meanwhile, nearly €100 million from the Next Generation EU recovery fund has been allocated to Corviale. About €50 million of that supports an energy-efficiency plan – including replacing thousands of windows. Bright red and blue double-glazed frames, some already installed, others stacked on the ground floor, feel like a cruel joke to tenants. "Why new windows? We need heat, elevators, leak repairs!" many tenants repeatedly ask. Outside, in dumpsters, the discarded windows pile up – perfectly usable but deemed obsolete, with no plan for reuse.

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Unlike radiators, elevators, or pipes – often invisible until they fail – windows are inherently visible. Politically, they matter more for how they look from the outside. While the old windows no longer meet energy standards, they also bear signs of life and adaptation. Energy performance assessed in isolation from everyday practices produces flawed results. The façades of Corviale reveal how residents shape their homes: curtains, drying clothes, plants, sunshades, satellite dishes. Many of these elements contribute to thermal comfort. Movable shades, for example, offer low-tech summer insulation. Corviale's east-west orientation makes this especially valuable, and every unit allows cross-ventilation through the interior street. Over time, window gaskets deteriorated, and drafts became a problem – leading residents to call the building *Palazzo dei Venti*, the "Palace of Winds." Angelo, a first-generation tenant and former head of the tenant association, paid out-of-pocket to install new windows on his apartment's façade and reused the old ones to enclose the courtyard-facing aisle. This allowed him to regulate airflow and kept pigeons off the balustrade.

His story is telling: instead of discarding materials, he recognized the adaptive potential in Corviale's standardized system.

The trap Britton-Purdy warns of is not just Corviale's crumbling infrastructure, but also an energy agenda that enforces universal solutions without regard for local practices. These policies erase functional, meaningful, and often repairable systems in favor of "progress" defined by industrial production. Nowhere is repair treated as a political alternative to consumption.

SAREP and Sinergo, the contractors for the energy upgrade, represent the industrial logic at play. SAREP, part of the Sandro Sigismondi Group, boasts of its "Made in Italy" expertise, including its Panamanian branch which claims to shape sustainable housing abroad (SAREP, 2024). But the difference between their glossy international projects and Corviale's reality is stark. The firm's vision of innovation does not include the ingenuity of residents who have long relied on passive design, low-tech fixes, and cultural knowledge embedded in domestic routines. Admittedly, the new windows – alongside façade and

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rooftop insulation – have improved thermal comfort. But now tenants complain of overheating. Once again, a purely technical solution has overridden lived expertise. Rather than build upon resident-led adaptations, the intervention erased them. The loss is not just functional: it's epistemic.

Repair, here, is not nostalgia. It is a way of knowing, adapting, and resisting. When residents like Angelo act, they reclaim authorship over their environment. In contrast, institutional solutions, however well-funded, continue to overlook the value of small, intelligent, everyday acts of care.

A corridor and a cat

"They treat us like prisoners here!"
Tenant complaint at Corviale

Rita lives on the fourth floor of Corviale. She works cleaning private homes in a nearby gated community,

Fig. 6 - Photo of a self-built apartment on the 4th floor of Corviale before and during demolition. Courtesy of Laboratorio di Città Corviale.

where villas with manicured lawns stand in sharp contrast to her own living conditions. Despite her frustration with ATER her apartment is spotless, a space of order and care carved from a larger system of neglect. "They treat us like prisoners," she says, not as exaggeration but as living truth.

In the 1970s, architect Mario Fiorentino and his team designed the fourth floor as a break in the repetitive housing blocks – a "social floor" envisioned to host shops, services, and collective activities. But before construction was complete, the space was occupied by families in urgent need of shelter. Many of them were skilled laborers who built and finished their own homes with care and ingenuity. What began as an improvised solution eventually became a lived infrastructure – one that fostered new forms of community but also suffered from unregulated expansion, social inequality, and spatial fragility. These former apartments are now part of the Corviale Memory Museum, a project curated by Maria

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"They don't maintain this building. They never listen to us."

Rocco from Laboratorio di Città Corviale. Housed in a former communal room, the museum documents this informal history, capturing what was lost when ATER decided to demolish and rebuild. Guendalina Salimei of T-Studio won the 2009 competition for redesign; construction did not begin until 2019. A lottery determined who would return. Rita stayed.

The new section – dubbed the "green kilometer" for its paint color, not for any added vegetation – houses over 100 families. The apartments are well built, with cross-ventilation, balconies, and integrated communal areas. But when asked about her dissatisfaction, Rita answers plainly: "They don't maintain this building. They never listen to us." In response, she and her neighbors have assumed informal responsibility for cleaning and basic repairs. Maintenance has become a grassroots duty – quiet, persistent, unpaid. Rita also dislikes her unit's internal layout. It lacks a corridor. Instead of a fluid domestic sequence, the apartment comprises three rooms with no internal circulation. The balcony, screened by green metal screens, adds to her feeling of enclosure. Her home, meant to be a place of dignity, instead feels like confinement. For her, the corridor is not just a hallway – it is a symbol of movement, autonomy, and architectural empathy. This longing speaks to something deeper: the fragility of design when it fails to meet the needs of daily life. The older, self-built homes – while informal – often had generous halls, thresholds, spatial buffers. They emerged from lived logic, not efficient diagrams. In contrast, the new units are standardized, shaped by generic metrics and institutional convenience. Their spatial economy reveals a systemic fragility: one that collapses under the weight of everyday use.

To cope, Rita makes subtle modifications. She installs a new kitchen window to improve ventilation. She removes the bidet to make space for her cat's litter box. She reinforces the balcony railing to keep the cat from escaping. These small acts, performed quietly, challenge the binary of success and failure often used to evaluate housing. Her rent is just 108 Euro per month – but no price can guarantee the feeling of home.

To praise the minor

Meanwhile, the city of Rome, under the banner *Roma si trasforma*, has launched another redevelopment initiative for Corviale with EU backing. The plan promises wellness, sport, culture, and community collaboration. But once again, the approach privileges formal interventions over meaningful engagement. It echoes Fiorentino's original strategy: ambitious, well-intentioned, but distant from the fragility of lived experience.

What Rita's story ultimately reveals is not just a tension between formal planning and informal adaptation, but between architectural permanence and the fragile systems that sustain it. The corridor she longs for is a spatial metaphor: a call for care, connection, and domestic dignity. Its absence points to how fragility manifests not just in broken elevators or crumbling walls, but in layouts that do not breathe, and in systems that do not listen.

This is where repair enters: not as a heroic act, but as a necessary response to failure. As Sebastián Ureta argues, repair is often ambivalent. It reveals neglect as much as it restores function (Ureta, 2014: 370). In Corviale, acts of repair are not about returning to a former ideal. They are about making life possible in the cracks of what was promised. Rita's quiet interventions – sweeping corridors, modifying spaces, caring for a cat – are not romantic.

Here, Jill Stoner's concept of the minor architect offers a useful frame. In her words, the minor architect is not defined by building scale or professional title, but by an attitude – one that works within constraints, values the incomplete, and operates through acts of care (Stoner, 2012). Rita is not trained as an architect, yet she embodies this role. Her adaptations are minor in form, but major in impact. They transform the home from a unit into a space of agency.

Stoner writes that minor architecture resists the totalizing logic of major systems. It thrives in interstitial spaces, in the margins of policy, in the corners of forgotten buildings. At Corviale, these minor architectures are everywhere: a plant placed in a hallway, a neighbor helping with repairs, a lining of tiles to embellish the elevators' entrance. They do not announce

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themselves, but they are the fragile scaffolding that holds life together. Perhaps, the future of Corviale does not lie in more insulation or new slogans. It lies in recognizing and sustaining these minor, fragile, often invisible efforts: architectures of maintenance, adaptation, and resistance.

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