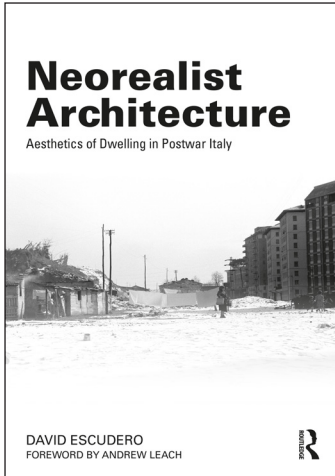


David Escudero, *Neorealist Architecture: Aesthetics of Dwelling in Postwar Italy*, New York, Routledge, 236 pp. – 2022. Paperback: € 45.49 – ISBN 9781032235042



By the end of the Second World War, Italy was in ruins. This particular condition, both physical and moral, provoked incoherent reactions that converged in an optimistic acceptance of everyday life interpreted and canonized under the rubric of *Neorealismo*. The vital need for sincere art to expose the reality of Italian *dopoguerra* (postwar) was fulfilled by local photographers and filmmakers who documented the extreme difficulties of everyday life while also communicating the country's sense of vitality and hopes for the future. In truth, as argued by erudite scholars such as Maristella Casciato, the previous tradition of neorealist literature – which began in the early-1930s – provided solid foundations for the tremendous production of images, documentaries, and films

that soon became the emblem of the liberated and democratic Italy. A meticulous investigation of this precarious imagery and its underexplored connections with architecture is the core of David Escudero's book "Neorealist Architecture. Aesthetic of Dwelling in Postwar Italy," published with the support of the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in Fine Arts (Chicago) as a result of the author's doctoral dissertation.

From the very first pages, making reference to a well-composed sequence of citations from both direct participants and distant commentators about this "collective state of mind," Escudero portrays Neorealism as a "cultural environment." Difficult to grasp, of course, "incoherent and contradictory," as asserted by Charles L. Leavitt, author of *Italian Neorealism: A Cultural History* (2020). However, for this very reason Neorealism can and should be ascribed to a complex cultural phenomenon that reached into other spheres of artistic production beyond the well-known cinematic tendency. Escudero's main argument is that, among these spheres of artistic production, architecture holds a place that is anything but marginal. Drawing from some key episodes that characterized architectural and urban experiments of mid-century *ricostruzione* in Italy, the author repositions the role of architecture as a relevant voice acting not in parallel, but within the artistic and cultural scene revitalized by neorealist impulses protracted for an indefinite period. In other

words, "Neorealist Architecture" reflects the author's invitation to scrutinize the various forms in which neorealist imagery manifested itself in architecture. At the same time, the civic commitment of Italian architects and urban planners who consolidated "a long experience of trust in the values of spontaneous architecture" provided a significant injection of visual capital, that is, additional images enriching the neorealist "atmosphere" and the correlated cultural environment. This circular trajectory, focused on mid-century Italian architecture and its capacity to absorb, produce, and disseminate familiar images of everyday life, is clearly reflected in the book's three-part structure and is brilliantly articulated through Escudero's commendable job of tying together developments in neorealist trend with the specifics of housing design as they manifested in his chosen cases. In Part I, "Towards a Concept: Neorealist Architecture," the author unpacks the cultural environment in which Neorealism and architecture coexisted. With the aim of "introducing the linkages that will continue to be unveiled throughout the book," this section looks at seven collective housing projects from the early-1950s that include, but are not limited to, the quintessential examples of the time – Quartiere Tiburtino (Rome), Villaggio La Martella (Matera), Viale Etiopia Towers (Rome) – with a particular focus on their reception. The second section, "A Neorealist Making in Architecture," delves deeper into the INA-CASA building

program as the most extensive and ambitious state initiative in postwar Italy, aimed at solving the shortage and the poor quality of housing by providing a wide range of alternatives in terms of land subdivision, typologies, and construction methods – an elaboration Escudero first piloted in the pages of *Architectural Theory Review* (Vol 24, 2020).

In Part III, “Neorealist Images of Architecture,” the concept of “architectural imagery” comes to the fore revealing why and how the selected projects – and their representation – “can be associated with an aesthetic shared with neorealism.”

The book is elegantly illustrated with more than 100 black-and-white images. In fact, its added value is the constant presence of archival materials. As Hal Foster and other critics have argued, the “archival impulse” animated modern culture since the invention of photography, and that is when photographic documents started operating as a replacement for a past event rather than a mere record of it. In this sense, all the images carefully selected by the author during his long stays in Italy dedicated to archival research (Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, CSAC Parma, Fondazione MAXXI) serve the book’s narrative well beyond a simple accompanying tool. Images constitute the essence of Escudero’s work as they mobilize archive objects of various natures – some unpublished – and then provide the basis for exhibiting his clear argument. Against this backdrop, it is well evident the author’s effort to balance the

eye-catching and somehow canonized neorealist iconographic repertoire of photographs and still frames with the dense architectural landscape of drawings, plans, design notations, and technical documents to show mutual infiltrations. Although they are not unpublished projects in architectural historiography, the simple move of reconsidering Tiburtino, La Martella, and other contemporary episodes under the neorealist cultural aura raises new questions about educated and self-proclaimed modern architects – Ludovico Quaroni and Mario Ridolfi out of all – who felt the need to “stage” architecture in this particular atmosphere, charging the spontaneous aesthetic of the everyday, the trivial, and the vernacular.

What we learn from Escudero’s book is, in the first instance, to interpret architecture not only as a cultural phenomenon *per se* but as a site of intense encounters where both ideas and tools for artistic production are selectively borrowed, partially adapted or rejected – even by the same authors when Italian architectural debate moved beyond the urgencies of the mid-1940s. As noted by Joan Ockman, invited as a discussant at the recent book presentation hosted by NYU’s Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò in New York, Neorealism represented a local and specific trend as we were entering a global image-saturated culture in support of the “new humanism” currents in architecture. Back to Italy, and back to the mid-1930s, Giuseppe Pagano’s arduous search for a modern tradition comes to mind

since he was, perhaps, the first “hunter of images” (*cacciatore di immagini*) portraying spontaneous atmosphere throughout the Italian peninsula displayed in “Architettura Rurale Italiana” (1936).

In the end, “Neorealist Architecture” is also a book that challenges the reader in the complicated operation of filtering architecture from powerful imagery. Accepting its heroic impulses and failures appears to be a good exercise, not only in approaching historical facts and events, but also in our contemporary times where filtering architecture from images – and imageries – is anything but a common practice.

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