

BOOK REVIEW: ESCUDERO D. (2023), *NEOREALIST ARCHITECTURE. AESTHETICS OF DWELLING IN POST-WAR ITALY*, ROUTLEDGE, ABINGDON, OX, UK

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Abstract. The present article is a review of the book: Escudero D. (2023), *Neorealist Architecture. Aesthetics of Dwelling in Post-war Italy*, Routledge, Abingdon, OX, UK, 236 pp., ISBN 978-1-003-27800-9.

Key words: Neorealist architecture, aesthetics, Italy, book review.

The book is a rich description of the cultural milieu in post-war (*dopoguerra*) Italy, written by an architect with a strong propensity for cinematic history. Its main aim is to ascertain whether neorealism manifested itself in architecture during the mid 1940s and mid 1950s. From a theoretical perspective, this issue is important because the term 'neorealist architecture' appeared later. Hence, the book traces the roots of neorealism in film and then explores its resonance in architecture, painstakingly looking at archival evidence. This is no mean feat, as the term 'neorealism' is quite elastic, and reverberations across different fields are difficult to pinpoint.

The book is composed in three parts: theory, practice, and representation. The first part begins with a conceptual trek. Neorealism in film emerged as a form of sincere art in the face of existential crisis. In architecture, it became a nimble response to the post-war housing shortages in Italy (some five million houses were needed to accommodate the large migratory flows generated by World War II). This would be a practical approach to everyday life, in stark contrast with the monumental approach of the fascist years.

For students in the history of architecture and urban planning, the first chapter is a gold mine: It chronicles seven housing estates in detail: Quartiere Tiburtino in Rome (1950–1956) (pp. 25ff.), Villaggio la Martella, near Matera (1951–1954) (pp. 34ff.), the towers in Viale Etiopia, again in Rome (1949–1954/1953–1956) (pp. 39ff.), Quartiere in Cerignola, in Foggia (1950–1951) (pp. 45ff.), Quartiere San Basilio, again in Rome (1949–1955) (pp. 48ff.), Quartiere in Cesate, near Milan (1951–1957) (pp. 54ff.), and finally, Quartiere Tuscolano II, in Rome (1950–1954) (pp. 58ff.).

The following chapter is more to the taste of theorists, as it deals mostly with terminology and the conceptual debates of the mid 1950s.

The second part of the book is a detailed description of the INA–Casa, a programme designed to tackle both unemployment and the housing shortages resulting from World War II. Approved in 1949, it would last for 14 years, until 1963, and produce some 350,000 dwellings. The INA–Casa serves as the pretext for investigating Italian planning and architectural practice during the post-war years. This part is

extremely valuable for architectural and urban historians, as it brims with fine detail. In addition, it is a case in point on how to produce a normative aesthetic with only two design manuals. The second chapter of this part is essentially a bridge that connects to the third and final part of the book. This chapter is rather more descriptive, depicting film scenes shot in INA-Casa neighbourhoods.

Part three is a study in imagery: cinematic, architectural, and photographic. It is richly illustrated and carefully described, essentially adding up to an album of case studies.

An epilogue follows, which binds the two avenues pursued in the book: the more pragmatic architectural approach in response to the post-war housing crisis, and the more inquisitive introspection in cinema.

So how did neorealism manifest itself in architecture? Rather obliquely: "Cinema and architecture converge, then, as an expression of neorealism in the synthesis of the three conditions referred to: while cinema highlighted anonymous daily life, the documentary chronicle of people's *dwelling*, and the person over the character, the architecture of the INA-Casa embodied popular aspirations and provided the spaces in which any anonymous inhabitant could imagine themselves, not as an unassailable desire but as a natural phase of progress. The neorealist *image* interlinked screen and reality: the film characters, the nonprofessional actors that played them, and those that went to the cinema, might

be the very same people—people that the INA-Casa program, out of its concern for the aesthetics of daily life, tried to provide with both physical and psychological well-being, through neighbourhoods and houses that shaped the 'urban environment' taking into account human's 'spiritual and material needs'." (p. 209).

Three levels of enquiry that need to be linked together, against the background of a very elastic concept. This is the main challenge of the book, on which it delivers, albeit only partially. I missed a clear-cut theoretical argument that would frame this wealth of carefully crafted case studies. However, the book is not an exercise in theory construction, but a work of architectural and cinematic history. And here it does deliver. I would strongly recommend this book to students in architecture and urban planning, as well as to film aficionados with a penchant for social history.

