

## Facing Corviale

Facing Corviale is not easy, it is already difficult to view it in its entirety unless you use an aeroplane or helicopter. It appears and disappears here and there through the suburban houses, and then it disappears within the complex landscape of Rome. It hides itself from the collective gaze, leaving you astonished when it finally reveals itself only when you are very close, obliterating not just the surrounding area but also every emotion that the building of economical and public housing schemes could ever possibly generate. Nevertheless, nearly everyone who approaches it has a preconception that forms part of the mythology of contemporary Rome: Corviale is one kilometre long. An undreamed of but clear and precise choice, a foundation that carries a strong, coherent, militant thought, a thought traced (even though too late in relation to its conception) between the contradictions of the contemporary city. When you start to address the "Corviale issue", this preconception seems to crumble, even when measuring it. Corviale is a few metres short of one kilometre because of a small compromise made in order not to move an electricity pylon. Here preciseness gives way to approximation, maybe it cannot be any other way when working with numbers which are so close to infinite

We begin to understand the checks and balances of Corviale. The checks and balances of an ideology of inhabiting, that has strongly sustained the large and diverse planning group gathered around the architect Mario Fiorentino, in the development of the project, and the checks and balances of the thirty year history of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants. This history is made of hope, desperation and solidarity, compromise and exception, rejection and spirit of adaptability.

Measuring it is ever more difficult: of the 8500 forecasted inhabitants, we don't know exactly how many are actually there, some appear to be residents but don't live there and some live there "illegally". We don't know exactly how many apartments are actually there, because the core of the project that is the Piano libero (the free floor) conceived for shops and services housed along the full length of the building between the fourth and fifth floors, was never actually realised. Its spaces have been occupied and transformed into apartments of many different kinds. There are also apartments that have been legally assigned, squatted apartments, apartments sublet to immigrants or handed on in exchange for money. There are those who pay rent and those who do not. There are many lifts, but how many actually work? And why don't they work?

To all this we have to add the media attention also out of proportion and partisan that Corviale attracts intermittently. In fact, the monumentality of the building made it an ideal setting for sensational, sociological local news, causing the neighbourhood to be known as a symbol, and sometimes a scapegoat for the evils and the problems of the suburbs well beyond Corviale's own objective responsibilities.

Approximation and uncertainty prevail in the distances (in time becoming more

sidereal) between the initial project, the present reality and the image built up over the years by the media.

There is a use of approximation between those (perhaps too many) who talk about Corviale, often taking advantage of the media buzz of the neighbourhood. Corviale is a goldmine for politicians, planners, sociologists and journalists. Apart from the inhabitants and some other exceptions, those who talk about Corviale often don't know it. In order to understand this better, you just need to bring up the image of the "serpent" often used to describe Corviale, yet so far away from the formal reality of the neighbourhood.

There are those, such as the media who speculate on an image, and those such as architects who "speculate" differently on an architectural scenario, which vitalised the neighbourhood, and there are others who speculate on realities, like politicians for whom Corviale has been a source of votes for many years. It is a place where problems were used as examples of the urgency for political intervention as a resolution. A resolution asked at every election period. Thus things stood, when in order to solve the problems of Corviale, its demolition was proposed. This was an ideological and tardy reaction, made yet again at the inhabitants' cost. These inhabitants, after twenty years of building an environment and identity as normal as possible, would have been evicted to who knows where, without even being asked.

Perhaps Corviale's biggest problem is this: the inhabitants (themselves exploited politically) find themselves without any political relevance and have not acquired any rights. They are still utilisers of a public service that is of very low quality and economically unsustainable for the public administration.

What Corviale lacks is any level of self-determination by the inhabitants along with a lack of representation within institutions. In fact, Corviale is much bigger and more coherent than any small town, and despite this it does not even have a mayor. It is the biggest of all the condominiums yet it has no administrator. People who decide for and speak on behalf of Corviale are people who do not live there and who often have never even been there.

#### The Nomadic Observatory at Corviale

The intervention of the Nomadic Observatory at Corviale places itself within the distance that separates the original project from the consolidated media images, and both of these from the reality of the neighbourhood that has already had a lifespan of nearly 25 years, and no political and administrative self-determination. It is an intervention that has been going on for two years, fragmented but highly diverse in its artistic, planning and media results, based on methodical frequentation, listening, and relating with inhabitants. An intervention aimed to promote awareness and self-organisation, both tools without which Corviale's "recovery" will continue to be a false problem.

In Corviale we have observed peoples' behaviour within the space, trying to understand and influence this behaviour. We are convinced that this produces more as regards urban transformation than design/project planning that does not

consider the real mechanism of production, use and management of the urban space. Ours is architecture of behaviour, of uses and of interpretations of space.

Beginning from the crossover between art, architecture and politics at the source of the planning of Corviale, we tried to delineate the tools which would revitalise a degraded relationship between politicians, planners and inhabitants: an intervention strategy into urban reality shared with the inhabitants and proposed to the political world as a concrete workshop of a new practice for transformation.

Not only does Corviale have an architectural value but also a cultural one, a value that the inhabitants have to be helped to perceive, because this can become a strong and qualifying element of identity. To perceive differently the space in which one lives means to start to live in it differently. This is an awareness that implies alienation, the creation of remoteness that distances oneself from the burden of reality and activates a desire of the possible. This alienation is, together with the empathy that one establishes with the investigated territories, a constructional aspect of the Nomadic Observatory. It is a natural alienation to a place, its institutions, and disciplines, and an availability to listen and involve oneself in the contexts investigated, which allows us to initiate dynamics able to create relations that are creative and responsible on behalf of the inhabited space.

The Nomadic Observatory has been a participating observer of the reality of Corviale. What we have aimed for is an emotive and imaginative involvement: we proposed visions that could stimulate people to bring themselves into play, to help them to transcend the banality and the everyday-ness of the space. Through playful and imaginative relational devices, we shared the possibility and the pleasure of imagining a different reality together with those inhabitants who started to look to their own world with fresh and less deluded eyes.

The intervention of the Nomadic Observatory has opened the way for a big project of the recovery of the neighbourhood. We hope that maybe, the gaze on Corviale is changing. It doesn't really matter if or how much we contributed to this change. What matters is that the executive project of recovery that is now initiating in Corviale includes the issues raised by the Nomadic Observatory and shares its values, without distancing itself from it in the attempt to impose solutions from above. If not, then there is the risk, despite the forecasted notable economical engagement, that yet again Corviale is a victim of the attention that surrounds it. In addition to this, the economical engagement could also end up being badly managed when addressing the massive housing emergency that nowadays preoccupies the city.

Lorenzo Romito  
Nomadic Observatory / Stalker

## The areas of intervention

To individuate the project's areas of intervention we were led by the resonance of real, vital and rooted needs; concrete questions put by the inhabitants such as the need for a different image to counterbalance the one of the media stereotype. From an almost enthusiastic dialogue and in conflict with those who live in Corviale, three dimensions have emerged to be investigated: the lived reality, its image and the imaginary. In order to address these, we have used three working tools: the Nomadic Observatory/Network, the Nomadic Observatory/Univercity and the Nomadic Observatory/Field.

Nomadic Observatory Network; a way to free oneself from the media condemnation, which makes Corviale the symbol of the suburbs.

Nomadic Observatory Network is the combination of a TV station, a newspaper and a website created to debate the media image imposed on the inhabitants by sociologists and journalists, so unaware of reality that they proposed the icon of the "serpent" for Corviale. This representation has transformed the neighbourhood into a symbol for all the evils of the suburbs, greatly hindering the process of identification of the inhabitants with Corviale. Our idea was to produce a "im-mediate" image to counterbalance the one consolidated and worked on by the mass media, and to develop together with the young people of the neighbourhood the creation of Corviale Network, a television station which would reinstall an unedited and creative image, careful to depict and valorise the transformation in action within the neighbourhood, through the voices of those who live there.

Nomadic Observatory Univercity, the workshops and the micro transformations

Nomadic Observatory Univercity points attention towards the processes of identification and the inhabitants' appropriation of the spaces in the neighbourhood, or more precisely to the dynamics of metabolisation of the rigid architectural structure through the creation of compartmentalisation and modification of the use of the spaces in the neighbourhood. With Corviale Univercity we have aimed to investigate and encourage such an activity, through a series of workshops and collaborations with various Italian and foreign universities. We aimed to move the direction away from the private sector of affirmation for one's own individual space towards a more self-aware and imaginative dimension of the creation of social and public spaces (reviving, not in the methods but in the spirit, the character of the social experimentation strongly aspired to by the architect Mario Fiorentino).

Nomadic Observatory Field, diffusing the self-awareness of living in a monument

Nomadic Observatory Field constitutes a reflection both about the concept, which has informed Mario Fiorentino's architectural project planning of the complex, and the metropolitan scenario caused by the apparition of this immense building.

Working in close contact with the inhabitants (from children from the local schools to Loredana, the owner of the Corviale apartment rented by the Nomadic Observatory), the work on the site aimed to recompose the historic memories of the Corviale project, with the baggage of experiences and memories of those who live the difficulties and challenges experienced in the everyday life in a building of those proportions.

### Safe Journey Corvianauti!

The instructions must be rewritten

Many secrets about the spaceship are known only to the inhabitants

First of all, they should be gathered, transcribed and shared

And yes...because the spaceship can only work if the inhabitants understand its use

A manual is not enough; in fact to know the map of the spaceship and to be furnished with a minimum of equipment it is not even enough

There is a need for a crew, chosen by and from the inhabitants, the corvianauti, capable of managing a structure, which will result in being amongst the most futuristic

A command bridge should be built for the spaceship, in direct and continuous contact with Earth Base, where the Municipality and Ater will co manage the maintenance of the complex systems of functionality and they will co manage the route of the spaceship inside the general dynamics of the Galaxy

Once having fine tuned the spaceship, having formed the crew, having created Earth Base, we will be able to call Earth Base from the command bridge of the spaceship Corviale and to communicate "Spaceship Corviale to Earth Base...repair the lifts and prepare for launch..."

Thus the cruising spaceship Corviale will eventually be able to travel through the space-time of the metropolis with renewed vigour...

Safe Journey Corvianauti! (from the newspaper "Corviale" produced by the Nomadic Observatory in 2004)

### The Nomad Observatory

The Nomad Observatory proposes a collaborative practice within research and action on the territory, inspired towards a paradigm that is cognitive, operative and non-assertive, but instead founded on cooperation, multidisciplinary, respect for diversity, conviviality and playfulness.

The practice of the Nomad Observatory is at the same time cognitive and transforming, founded in action, or even better on co-action between the observer who is the participating but external agent and the territory with its own living reality, memories and the scenarios of those who enliven it.

The Nomad Observatory is itself evolving, irregularly and dynamically; it emerges from the chaos through network assembly and projections. It interweaves relations looking to

creatively promote self-awareness, collaboration and self-organisation, experimenting with an organisational model different to the dominant hierarchical and competitive one. For every territory faced and for every project, a specific Nomad Observatory network is set up. The Nomad Observatory network is promoted by Stalker.