Il Tempo di Corviale

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"Rome is surely the most beautiful city in Italy, if not the world. But it is also the most ugly, the most welcoming, the most dramatic, the richest, the most wretched."

—Pier Paolo Pasolini, from "The City's True Face"

As we drove down Via Portuense on Fabrizio's scooter, Corviale loomed in the distance. It was startling in its girth, singularity, and isolation—impossible to take in with one glance, even from a mile or so away. As we approached, the power of Corviale's startling statistics rattled in my brain: eleven stories high, nearly one kilometer long, and designed for 8,000 inhabitants. It was only fitting that I was with Fabrizio for this excursion to one of Rome's most notorious government-sponsored modernist housing projects, because our conversations over a number of years were, in many ways, the catalyst for this mission.

I had been visiting Rome regularly for more than a decade and thus far my days had mostly been spent wandering, examining, and reading my way through Rome's endlessly rich and seductive past. In spite of the pulsating din of Fabrizio's scooter, I drifted back to one of our many dialogues:

"I find architecture to be the most crystallized form though which to understand the past. Buildings have a way

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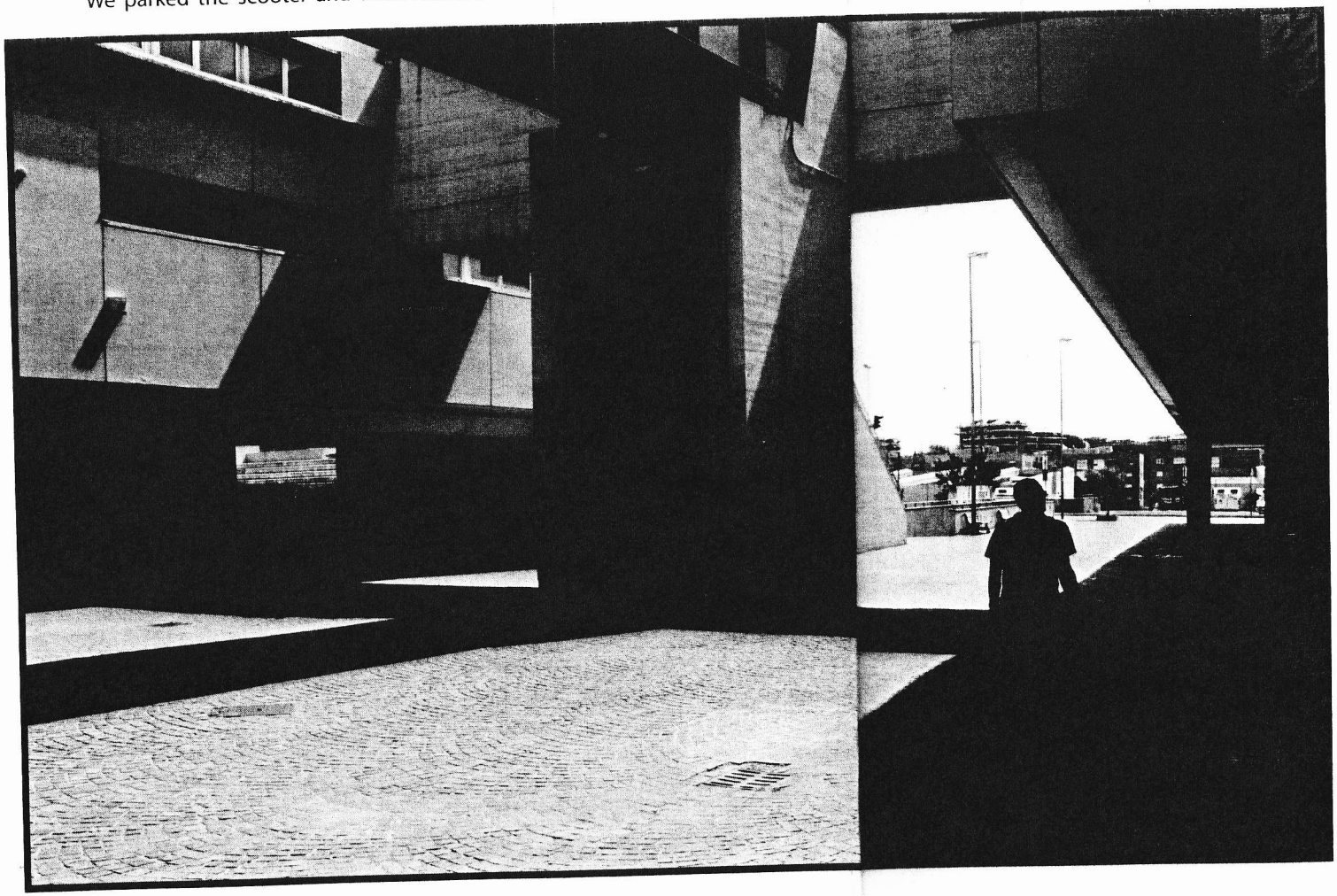
of revealing political, cultural, and philosophical ideas that are then experienced as physical entities existing in the world," I had said.

"Fair enough," Fabrizio had responded, "but how many times can you visit St. Peter's, the Coliseum, or the Pantheon? What do you know of the Rome beyond the old city center, of Rome since World War II?"

We parked the scooter and soon realized that the central form of this

massive complex could only be accessed by first traversing an isolated and semi-enclosed catwalk. It was Sunday morning and—although Corviale resonated with a particular kind of misery that inhabited its rundown and repetitive geometry—in the literal sense the place was quiet.

As we climbed the stairs leading to the catwalk I became engrossed in photographing the space. More than just a vehicle for capturing images, the lens framed discreet and sonorous impressions that penetrated my being, akin to the foreboding and singular notes of a brooding musical composition. The catwalk soon led to other dynamic transitional spaces, many of which were articulated by hulking concrete walls and deep shadows. It was hard to get a visual handle on the place from any single vantage point, so I just kept moving.



Fabrizio and I intuitively kept each other in sight, but I have no memory of us talking. When we finally got close to the main structure, I remember scanning back and forth down Corviale's endless linear trajectory and being struck by its physicality. Its visual and psychological weight was broken only by the fragmented geometries of the windows, balconies, and hanging laundry that rippled along its facade.

Governments around the world have attempted to solve any number of particular housing problems using modern architecture's rectilinear structures and economy of means. The often ill-fated results have been well documented. Nonetheless, the isolation and immensity of

brutality, both visual and experiential.

Oddly, I have no memory of seeing any people that day. However, the residue of human activity was ubiquitous—in parked cars, peeling graffiti, and discarded stuff. The image of a blue plastic bucket is etched in my mind, perhaps because it represented the possibility of the normal rituals of housework or even of play. I also remember some straggly flowers desperately trying to reach beyond their small rectangular planters in a vain attempt to absorb a bit of the eternal Roman sun.

I don't know how long Fabrizio and I explored Corviale. Maybe a few hours. Time has a way of being compressed when an experience forces one to be so present. As we drove back to my apartment near Vatican City my mind flooded with memories of my student days in the romantic and picturesque Italian hilltowns of Siena and Cortona. I would never have imagined a place like Corviale being built in a country so revered for having created architecture—or, for that matter, whole towns—with such a strong sense of community and rootedness to geography.

Later that day I sat on the balcony of my apartment, taking in the late afternoon sun and listening to chatter of children playing in the courtyard below. My mind was sifting though visual and auditory sensations from the morning and racing to connect my impressions of Corviale to broader questions—historical, cultural, and personal.

For a moment, my mind wandered and I found myself imagining a group of men standing around a large metal table with a glass top positioned near tall windows that allowed ample light to flood the room. On the table was a pristine white model of Corviale. The men in the room were well groomed, wearing polished loafers, crisp white shirts, sleek ties, and distinctive dark-rimmed glasses. Just at the moment when I started to envision satisfied smiles on their faces for having designed the longest residential building in Europe, I stopped myself and actively tried to push this thought out of my mind. To do this, I closed my eyes and tried to conjure up an image of Corviale itself. However, I found it impossible to picture just one view. Instead, disembodied shapes and colors moved passed my mind's eye, spectral impressions formed, dissolved, and reformed in a space with a vague contour, but no definable center.

*The drawing for the cover of this issue of The Humanities Review derives from a photograph I took at Corviale during a late morning in June 2007. I took all the accompanying photographs that same day.