

# Playing within De Carlo's Field.

## Architectural Historians and the Villaggio Matteotti

Filippo De Pieri

### *Abstract*

The paper takes the New Villaggio Matteotti in Terni, a housing complex designed by Giancarlo De Carlo in the early 1970s, as an observation point from which to measure some of the competences and tools that architectural historians of late modernism have often mobilized. The analysis of the existing literature on the Villaggio brings to identify at least three recurrent ways of understanding the role of the historian. First, the historian as an intellectual exposing the contradictions behind architectural practice. Second, the historian as a philologist and a specialist in the treatment of dedicated archival sources. Third, the historian as a specialist in the study of architectural forms. The analysis suggests that, at least in this case, historians have firmly situated themselves within definitions and ways of understanding the architectural object that had been initially codified by the designer. This raises questions concerning the capacity of architectural history to contribute to radical changes in the interpretation of the built environment.

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Few twentieth-century buildings have challenged the notion of architectural competence as Giancarlo De Carlo's "Nuovo Villaggio Matteotti" (New Matteotti Village) did in the early 1970s. Designed by the Italian architect for the workers of the publicly owned steel production company in Terni, as a replacement of a previous housing development from the late 1930s, the complex quickly became a symbol for the role potentially played by user participation in architectural design and for the need to take into account a new social dimension of architectural practice. Whether such a goal was actually achieved is an open and much debated question. To further investigate it is not the aim of this paper, which has a different purpose, that is, to observe and discuss the type of competence that architectural historians have mobilized over time in order to understand this piece of architecture. From this point of view, the Villaggio Matteotti represents a potentially useful starting point for an investigation into the ordinary research practices that contribute to shape architectural history as a field of study.

In the pages that follow, I will focus on three ways of understanding their own work that scholars have adopted when writing about this iconic building complex: the historian as a critic of the state and condition of architectural practice; the historian as a validator of existing narratives on the basis of (mostly) archival sources; and the historian as an explorer of the rationalities and the inner logic of form-making. Each of these postures has its own intellectual premises and mobilizes different tools and abilities.

I will deliberately focus on studies that explicitly present themselves as historical in scope, although it is important to remind that, over the last fifty years, representations of the Villaggio Matteotti have come from a plurality of specialized and non-specialized observers belonging to different fields of study and action (Ciacci and Peraino, 2014: 69-77; Savoldi, 2021). My analysis will lead me to conclude that these historical approaches have at least one point in common: they mostly tend to move within a perimeter of acceptable descriptions of the object that De Carlo himself contributed to build during and after its completion. In the final paragraph, I will offer a few remarks about this state of affairs, which arguably has implications for both the understanding of architectural history as

an autonomous scholarly practice and its capacity to respond – or actively contribute – to changing paradigms in architectural research.

*The historian as an exposé of the historical contradictions behind architectural practice*

In his “History of Italian Architecture 1944-1985”, a work first appeared in the early 1980s and republished in book form in 1986, Manfredo Tafuri dedicated a chapter, called “The fragment and the city”, to four housing projects of the 1970s: Carlo Aymonino and Aldo Rossi’s Gallarate complex in Milan, Mario Fiorentino’s Corviale in Rome, Vittorio Gregotti’s Zen scheme in Palermo and Giancarlo De Carlo’s Villaggio Matteotti in Terni. These experiments, Tafuri argued, stood out for their “international breadth” and their “methodological as well as exemplary value”. They collectively “closed an era” – the two previous decades, dominated by the work of *maestri* such as Bruno Zevi, Ernesto Nathan Rogers, Giuseppe Samonà and Ludovico Quaroni – and “signaled a change in direction that would lead to numerous developments” (Tafuri, 1989: 118-119).

The pages of the book dedicated to De Carlo’s project in Terni count among the most sympathetic analyses ever written on this piece of architecture. Despite presenting it as an isolated *exemplum*, Tafuri argued that the relevance of the Villaggio Matteotti did not lie in its qualities as an object, but in the process to which it was associated, one in which the architect’s action exposed a series of contradictions and activated new social and political forces. De Carlo had presented the Matteotti, at the time of its completion, insisting on the role played by user participation and on the precarious balance between order and disorder that was behind architectural choices (De Carlo et al., 1977). Tafuri inflected these narratives in directions that were closer to his historical analyses of the condition of perpetual crisis affecting architecture under modern capitalism (Biraghi, 2013; Cohen, 2015: 137-166). In De Carlo’s work, he appreciated “the search for a method and, above all, a rigor, both of which might restore credibility to the discipline” and the architect’s capacity to turn “the mythology of participation into a flexible instrument of experimentation” (Tafuri, 1989: 120). He observed that the architect’s attempt to

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**Fig. 1 - The Villaggio Matteotti** in the two-pages photo by Gabriele Basilico published in the special section of "Casabella" dedicated to the complex. The image offers an inward-looking representation of the scheme, focused on the newly built public spaces and on the social life within them. Source: De Carlo et al., 1977: 24-25.

“redefine the relationship between intellectuals and production” in the Terni case had broader and partly unforeseen repercussions, and that despite the difficulties faced by the initiative and its partial failure “the results of the participatory process that De Carlo had set in motion [...] branched out into a number of directions,” leading to a discussion of “the modes of production and their global management” (ibid.: 121). Although the points of view of the historian and the architect were not necessarily coinciding, Tafuri’s reading certainly resonated with De Carlo’s belief that the architect had to be a suscitor of conflicts and contradictions in order to have an impact on the production of space and on the people’s capacity to appropriate it (De Carlo, 2013; De Pieri, 2018).

Like many relevant buildings of its time, the Villaggio Matteotti was historicized quite soon. In the first edition of his *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, published in 1980, Kenneth Frampton presented the Terni complex as part of a growing attention for “the needs and mores of the user”, close to advocacy planning and to the theories of John Turner and N. John Habraken. He recognized the “remarkable quality and variety” of the architecture but observed that “the manner in which the users’ desires were finally interpreted remains a controversial issue” (Frampton, 1992: 290). By the early 1980s, it seemed obvious that the task of architectural historians, when writing broad retrospective overviews of twentieth-century modernism, lay in proposing critical narratives in which the individual episodes could find their place and significance. Tafuri’s *History of Italian Architecture* was not dissimilar in its interpretation of the historian’s competence, and indeed quite distant from the “philological turn” that Tafuri was advocating in his Renaissance writings of the same years (Asor Rosa, 1995; Olmo, 1995; Vidler, 2008: 157-189). As it has also been noted, the *Storia* was the outcome of an interesting self-effacing process – a process in which the author systematically omitted his presence from a story that had often seen him as a co-protagonist (Leach, 2002; Leach, 2007: 130-137). The author’s closeness to the intellectual and professional milieu that he discussed indeed contributed to make the book so lively (Passerini, 2000; Carpenzano, 2019: 55-66, 133). Despite Tafuri’s objectifying posture – one that tended

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Relazione al II convegno Aisu (Roma, 24-26 giugno 2004)

Questo breve intervento è dedicato al "Nuovo Villaggio Matteotti" di Giancarlo De Carlo, pensato e costruito dal 1969 al 1975 a Terni per gli operai ed impiegati delle Acciaierie di Terni. Il Villaggio è comunemente considerato uno dei quartieri residenziali chiave dell'architettura italiana fra fine anni '60 e anni '70, e figura in tutti i libri di storia dell'architettura. Sto preparando una monografia dedicata interamente a questo villaggio, un lavoro che mi ha permesso di ricercare e studiare tutte le fonti (scritte, disegnatte, fotografiche, registrate su nastri etc.) che documentano la genesi del villaggio, custodite presso l'archivio delle acciaierie di Terni, l'archivio comunale, gli archivi privati degli architetti, sociologi, committenti etc., fonti documentarie fin ora mai prese in considerazione dalla storiografia.

Su questa base è possibile offrire un'ampia lettura in chiave storico-critica di questo importante quartiere, della quale in questa sede posso comunque fare solo qualche cenno.

Il "Nuovo Villaggio Matteotti" è sempre stato presentato nelle riviste come un esempio chiave di architettura della partecipazione, e così compare nei libri di storia dell'architettura. Passeggiando per il villaggio o guardando le sue foto, questa genesi pare anche molto plausibile: la ricchezza formale quasi casuale e la diversità morfologica del villaggio sembrano il risultato di decisioni individuali da parte dei abitanti. Il quartiere mostra l'immagine di un'architettura basata su scelte "democratiche".

Le fonti finora mai considerate fanno vedere però che l'architettura del villaggio era stata ben definita da De Carlo già prima di interpellare i futuri abitanti. Senza nulla togliere all'ovvia qualità architettonica del quartiere, dobbiamo smettere di usare lo slogan "partecipazione" nel contesto del "Nuovo Villaggio Matteotti" e ridurlo a quello che era: "partecipazione" era un mero motore di lancio per il quartiere, usato solo in un momento successivo alle elaborazioni del progettista; "partecipazione" era il concetto di moda del momento, ma non è la chiave per capire il "Nuovo Villaggio Matteotti".

De Carlo venne incaricato di redigere il progetto del "Nuovo Villaggio Matteotti" nell'aprile del 1969 e fin dall'inizio, sia pure in dimensione modesta, intendeva colloquiare con i futuri abitanti. Il direttore delle acciaierie di allora, Gian Lupo Osti, mi ha detto (*intervista dell'autore con Gian Lupo Osti, 4.12.2001*) di aver incaricato De Carlo anche perché egli si era pronunciato favorevole a questo approccio. Il progetto urbanistico (basato su edifici in linea) era definito già nel dicembre 1969, come dimostra la richiesta al comune di Terni di cambiare la posizione di servizi di quartiere nel piano regolatore (BUAV, AP, *Archivio Giancarlo De Carlo, corr. I, protocollo di De Carlo datato 19.12.1969*). De Carlo per il progetto era partito naturalmente dalla propria esperienza, che non contemplava però allora veri quartieri residenziali, ma solo complessi di case per studenti e i

quartieri INA-Casa di Sesto San Giovanni e Baveno, peraltro scarsamente considerati dallo stesso autore. Per illustrare le sue proprie preferenze in edilizia residenziale De Carlo citava allora esplicitamente Jonas Lehrman e il suo articolo *Housing: low level - high density*, (*«Architectural Design»*, n. 2, 1966, p. 80-85). Qui Lehrman parla in favore di edifici con appartamenti aggregati in modo complesso ed alti pochi piani come alternativa alle vaste aree di case singole (soprattutto negli Stati Uniti), che sprecano spazio, e come alternativa agli edifici a torre con la loro povertà estetica. Queste soluzioni sono economiche ma secondo Lehrman manca loro la «true scale of the individual», non rispettano la volontà delle persone di risiedere in case individualmente connotate. «The quality of urban housing has been recognised to depend on safety (in terms of the separation of pedestrian and the vehicle), convenience (a full range of suitable dwelling types within any neighbourhood), visual interest (building and spaces) and a variety of things to do and places to go (no neighbourhood too remote from areas of employment, shops, public activities, or mass transit)». Il "Visual Interest" è illustrato con una città collinare dell'area mediterranea, come Urbino, che De Carlo stesso aveva intensamente studiato.

Nel febbraio 1970, De Carlo stese una lista di sei punti, che illustrano il "Nuovo Villaggio Matteotti" con tutte le sue caratteristiche e che dimostra la vicinanza fra le idee di Lehrman e De Carlo stesso.

«Definizione di massima di alcuni obiettivi che si vorrebbero raggiungere nella progettazione.

1. Movimenti pedonali separati dai movimenti automobilistici con rare intersezioni nei punti dove sono strettamente necessarie. Facilità di circolazione automobilistica con servizio porta a porta e con adeguate attrezzature di garage e parcheggio.

Percorsi pedonali in scala commisurata alle esigenze psicologiche individuali: spazi di percezione immediata, variabilità e suggestione dei percorsi, presenze naturali, finezza di dettaglio. (questo è il "visual interest")

2. attribuzione ad ogni alloggio di zone rilevanti di verde privato, sottratte il più possibile al controllo collettivo. Composizione del verde privato tale da poterlo percepire nel complesso come un verde massivo (privatizzazione a livello di alloggio che produce complessivamente un vantaggio collettivo). [le terrazze giardino erano quindi un'idea prefissata da De Carlo]

3. formazione di zone verdi collettive ad uso della comunità e dei servizi di quartiere.

4. a livello di quartiere, formazione di servizi pubblici non solo destinati a risolvere le immediate esigenze degli abitanti, ma tali da attrarre interessi anche dalle zone circostanti.

5. tipologia edilizia né frammentaria né a blocco. [qui abbiamo low-level-high-density] Soluzioni tipologiche tali da offrire una chiara organizzazione dell'ambiente senza tuttavia limitare la privacy di ogni nucleo sociale, anche minimo.

6. tipologia degli alloggi variata a seconda delle prevalenti composizioni familiari, organizzazioni interne flessibili, tali da consentire il più alto livello possibile di variabilità d'uso degli spazi.

Attrezzatura degli alloggi basata sulla formazione di elementi fissi destinati a agevolare le funzioni più elementari e quindi ad aumentare la libertà delle funzioni più complesse.

Fig. 2 - Two pages from Hermann Schlimme's paper on the Villaggio Matteotti. The version of the file reproduced here was retrieved online in 2011. Source: Schlimme, 2004: 1-2.

to identify the author's authority with his artificial "distance" from the narrated facts (Ackerman, 1994: 137) – the reader could perceive that writing history partly amounted to continuing, with other means, a conversation that had started in the daily exchanges and polemics between architectural experts. Tafuri's interpretation of the Villaggio Matteotti has been extremely influential. In a recent book dedicated to the role of the architect as intellectual – and its decline over the course of the last half century – Marco Biraghi revived the narrative of the Matteotti as both a fragment and a process. He presented the episode as one of the few moments in postwar architectural history in which the architect's awareness of the contradictions hidden behind his own role brought him to open a productive conflict with the client (Biraghi, 2019: 139-144).

### *The historian as a philologist*

By the early 2000s, the increasing availability of archival documents and the international attention for a re-assessment of De Carlo's body of work support-

ed the emergence of a new generation of studies on the architect based on the systematic exploration of primary sources (Samassa, 2004; Alici, De Pieri, 2019). In the case of the Matteotti, this shift became visible in an article written by German architectural historian Hermann Schlimme in 2004. The paper itself would be a good topic for a microhistorical study focusing on the processes of dissemination of academic knowledge in the digital era. Presented at a conference in Rome, it was never published in official form. It was however diffused through the internet and sparse copies of it can still be found today on various sites, none of which directly traceable to its author.<sup>1</sup> At a time when online resources dedicated to De Carlo were limited and when new research on the Villaggio Matteotti was lacking, the short text became a sort of informal open-access publication that enjoyed wide circulation among De Carlo scholars.

The interest for the essay was driven in equal parts by its provocative approach and by the breadth of the research on which the work seemed to be based, at least judging from the wide array of documents that the text strategically evoked. The author, then affiliated to the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome, gave great importance to archival research and went as far as to claim, in the initial lines, that he had “sought after and studied all the sources [*tutte le fonti*] (written, drafted, photographic, recorded on tape, etc.) that document the genesis of the village, kept in the archives of the Terni steel factory, the municipal archives, private archives of architects, sociologists, clients, etc.” (Schlimme, 2004: 1; all translations from this article are by the author). The main thesis behind the paper was summarized by its subtitle: “Failed participation and architectural masterpiece.” Schlimme challenged the interpretations that had presented the Villaggio Matteotti as a key episode in Italian experiences on user participation in architectural design processes. He argued that the rich and articulated spatial layout of the complex was not due to the influence of the choices expressed by its future inhabitants, but rather to a design strategy put in place by De Carlo from the very beginning. A close investigation of the available documents, he suggested, could lead to conclude that participation was “not the key for understanding” the Villaggio and that participation, all things consid-

**1 – The paper** was presented at the second AISU (Italian Association of Urban History) conference in Rome on 24 June 2004, in a session on social housing coordinated by Paola Di Biagi. The text was initially published on the association's website, at the (now defunct) link [www.storiaurbana.it/biennale/Relazioni/B5SCHLIM.doc](http://www.storiaurbana.it/biennale/Relazioni/B5SCHLIM.doc). Due to the modalities of its digital diffusion, it does not appear in major research library catalogues. The author did not reply to a request for further information sent out in October 2021.

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Such a posture – not exempt from positivist implications – leads the authors to underevaluate the active role in the choice, selection and construction of the sources that can be played by both historians and architects.

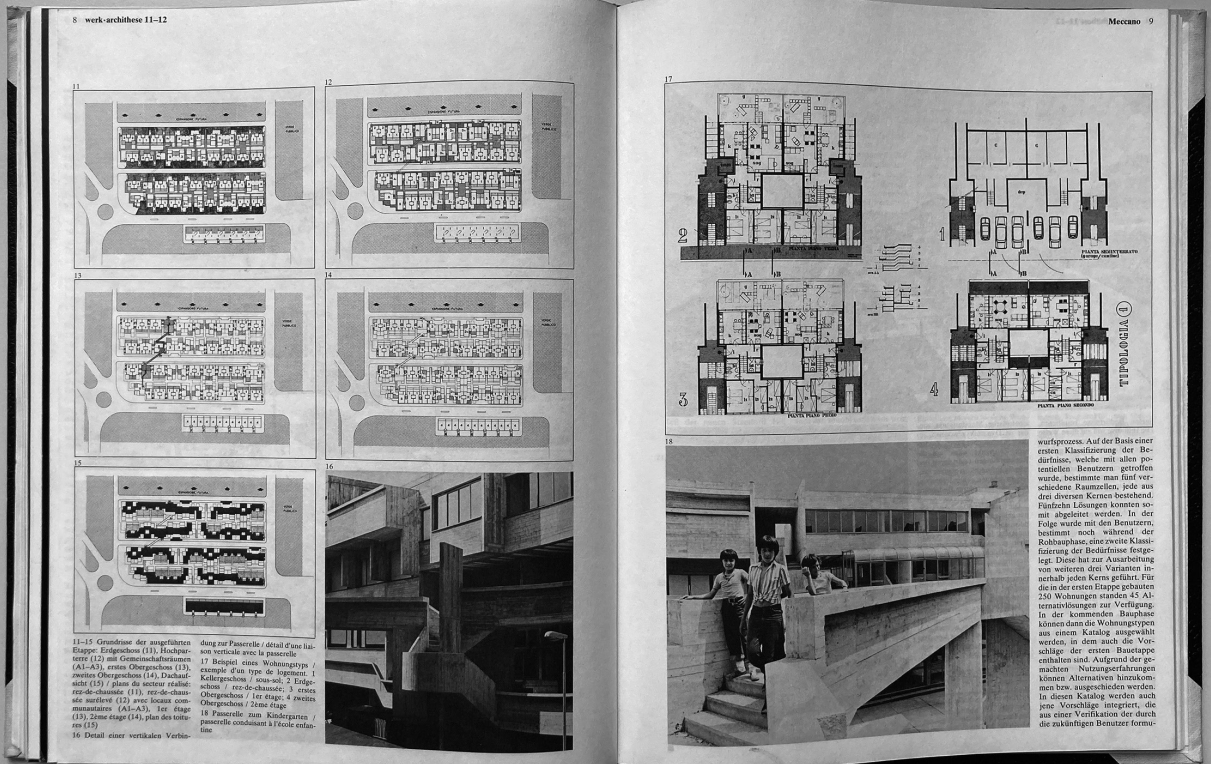
ered, had been little more than a slogan for what was instead a successful formal experiment. The author returned to the topic a few years later, with an essay more focused on the *pars construens* of his work and arguably also less influential (Schlimme, 2009). The in-depth monographic work on the Villaggio that the paper announced never saw the light.

Other researchers, however, took a similar path in the following years, most notably Alberto Franchini, whose book on the Villaggio Matteotti was published in 2020 as the outcome of a PhD thesis (Franchini, 2020). The work makes extensive use of archival sources to propose a detailed analysis of the building and the processes behind its design. It provides what can be considered as the most reliable reconstruction of the history of the Villaggio, although it keeps away from proposing clear-cut interpretations about the building and does not explicitly discuss those offered by previous studies. The author contextualizes the Matteotti within De Carlo's career, taking the building as a starting point to carry out a monographic study of the architect's personal trajectory that concentrates on a few relevant topics inspired by this design episode (namely, participation in architecture, collective housing, the pedagogical value of space, and architectural language). The micro scale of analysis does not serve to challenge broader interpretations (as microhistorical studies have usually tended to assume: Levi, 1992) but rather to confirm, from a situated angle, patterns that have already emerged from other perspectives of inquiry. In this respect, the work adheres to a narrative, established by previous biographical works, that presented De Carlo's architectures as the outcome of a lifelong reflection on a number of ever-recurring questions (Rossi, 1987; Bunčuga, 2000; McKean, 2004; Guccione and Vittorini, 2005).

The studies by Schlimme and Franchini share the implicit belief that the first task of the historian is to systematically explore the available sources on a given architecture: read all the documents and the story behind the building will become clear. Such a posture – not exempt from positivist implications – leads the authors to underevaluate the active role in the choice, selection and construction of the sources that can be played by both historians and architects, for example through the organization of the latter's archives (Colomina, 1994; Yaneva, 2020). The way in which a



Fig. 3 - Article by Giancarlo De Carlo presenting the Villaggio Matteotti on "Werk/Architese", as part of the thematic issue "Meccano". The scheme is presented here as the result of a combination between different types of dwelling units. Source: De Carlo, 1977: 8-9.



11-15 Grundriss der ausgerichteten Etage (Erdgeschoss (11), Hochparterre (12) mit Gemeinschaftsräumen (A1-A3), erstes Obergeschoss (13), zweites Obergeschoss (14). Durchdringung (15) / plans du secteur résidentiel: rez-de-chaussée (11), rez-de-chaussée surélevé (12), avec locaux communitaires (A1-A3), 1er étage (13), 2ème étage (14), plan des toitures (15)  
 16 Detail einer vertikalen Verbindung zur Passarelle / détail d'une liaison verticale avec la passerelle  
 17 Beispiel eines Wohnungstyps / exemple d'un type de logement, 1. Obergeschoss / non-sol, 2. Erdgeschoss / rez-de-chaussée; 3. erstes Obergeschoss / 1er étage; 4. zweites Obergeschoss / 2ème étage  
 18 Passarelle zum Kinderparterre / passerelle couloir à l'étage enfantin

wurfprozesse. Auf der Basis einer ersten Klassifizierung der Bedürfnisse, welche mit allen potentiellen Benutzern getroffen wurde, bestimmte man fünf verschiedene Raumzellen, jede aus drei dieser Kerne bestehend. Fünfzehn Lösungen konnten somit abgeleitet werden. In der Folge wurde mit den Benutzern, bestimmt noch während der Bauphase, eine zweite Klassifizierung der Bedürfnisse festgelegt. Diese leit zur Ausarbeitung von weiteren drei Varianten innerhalb jedes Kernes geföhrt. Für die in der ersten Etappe gebauten 250 Wohnungen standen 45 Alternativlösungen zur Verfügung. In der kommenden Bauphase können dann die Wohnungstypen aus einem Katalog ausgewählt werden, in dem auch die Vorschläge der ersten Baustaple enthalten sind. Aufgrund der gemachten Nutzungserfahrungen können Alternativen hinzukommen bzw. ausgeschlossen werden. In diesen Katalog werden auch jene Vorschläge integriert, die aus einer Verifikation der durch die zukünftigen Benutzer formu-

Historians working on the Matteotti from this point of view have usually oscillated between two seemingly opposite – but more often complementary – strategies of interpretation, which can be defined as respectively element-based and landscape-based.

philological approach to documents is practiced by the two works is partly different, with Schlimme using sources as a support to an interpretation that counters conventional narratives and Franchini reflecting the practices of a new generation of architectural historians that increasingly see archives of 20th-century architecture not only as a resource for knowledge and interpretation but also as a source of professional legitimization within the architectural community.

*The historian as an interpreter of the inner logic of design*

The third recurrent posture that can be identified in historical studies of the Villaggio Matteotti sees historians as specialists in the analysis of forms. Their competence would lie in the capacity to read an architectural project, to illustrate its priorities and inner organization, and to trace formal genealogies. Such was already the case of the studies discussed in the previous paragraph, where the attention for primary sources and philological analysis ultimately led to discuss the compositional choices made by De Carlo. Historians working on the Matteotti from this point of view have usually oscillated between two seemingly opposite – but more often complementary – strategies of interpretation, which can be defined as respectively element-based and landscape-based. Both strategies are rooted in the ways in which De Carlo presented the complex at the time, either to the local and the general public or to specialized international audiences. The first interpretation consists in a disaggregation of the elements of the complex and in the identification of the “structure” that keeps them together. A recurrent move is the close analysis of the 45 dwelling types that were shown to the future inhabitants of the Villaggio, together with the illustration of the combinatory rules that guided their aggregation (De Jorge-Huertas, 2018). A similar logic has often been applied to the study of elevated pathways and other circulation spaces, moving from the assumption that the articulation of open spaces, and not the combination of building blocks or dwelling units, offers a privileged entry point into the design strategies behind the Villaggio.

A second strategy of interpretation moves from an understanding of the overall visual and spatial effect generated by the complex, as if the combinatory strategies ultimately responded to the goal of shaping an artificial built landscape characterized by a recognizable

visual unity. Modernist experiments such as Mies van der Rohe's masterplans for the Weissenhof *Siedlung* in Stuttgart would represent potential predecessors for such a design choice (Pommer, Otto, 1991: 36-44). Many studies have evoked De Carlo's attention for British experiences in the field of high-density, low-rise housing (Lehrman, 1966; Swenarton, 2015). Others have insisted on the vernacular undertones of a work that has been described as recalling the built landscape of Mediterranean hill towns and villages (Schlimme, 2009). The quest for an integration between a strong formal coherence and a plurality of individual variations would be the lesson that De Carlo was trying to learn from such seemingly spontaneous landscapes. The treatment of green spaces within the complex, with the individual private balconies and the communal pathways participating to the definition of a broader effect, has often been discussed under such a perspective. Finally, the building has been observed in the context of the densely interwoven "mat-building" experiments put in place by architects of the Team 10, with their disdain for functional disaggregation and their interest for "a two-dimensional dense fabric, where man walks and lives in" (Smithson, 1974; Avermaete, 2005; Molinari, 2015). It is worth reminding here that De Carlo's own descriptions of the Matteotti complex – which was shown to Team 10 members during the 1976 Spoleto meeting – often evoked the hierarchical primacy of an undivided unity within which all spatial experiences were comprised: a famous definition of the organization of the Villaggio presented the complex as being made up not of parallel slabs or aggregated typologies but of "superposed, excavated decks" (*piastre sovrapposte scavate*: Risselada, Van den Heuvel 2005, 221). All these interpretations focus on the inner logic of the complex – the way in which the compositional puzzle was set up and solved – and look for potential formal influences, following threads that originate in the architect's biography and experience. A recurrent argument in the analyses deals with the unfinished character of the project, an issue that was raised by De Carlo in his retrospective accounts: the fact that only a part of the broader schemes proposed by the architect was implemented leads to appreciate the existing built landscape as the trace left by a more ambitious strategy. In so doing, historians tend to adhere to a

**2 – The only retrospective accounts that partly depart from De Carlo's perspective come from research fields that have a certain degree of autonomy from architectural research, such as local history or industrial archaeology (Fioriti, 1998; Covino, 2009).**

**3 – This was, incidentally, quite unusual for an architect that had displayed a strong tendency to understand architectural objects as a part of the city at large, as shown in the same years by his research on universities and schools (De Carlo, 1969). Urban historians of Terni have, in turn, often overlooked the experience of the Villaggio Matteotti, which is not mentioned, for example, in Alessandro Portelli's classic oral history work on the city (Portelli, 1985).**

si potrebbe pagare, capito? Io parlo sul mio conto, poi adesso ci saranno quelli che lavorano e potrebbero anche pagarlo un affitto maggiorato, io per esempio a quelle condizioni non.....

Dr. DE MASI

Certe che le case in fitto non se se costano come quelle a riscatto.....

Ma guardi che io ci ho spese quasi un milione! Ci ho fatte i tramezzi, ho messo i termosifoni, ci ho messo la vasca da bagno che prima... insomma, via, queste cose qui prima non ci stavano, appena dopo la guerra erano case spogliate di tutto, io ci ho spese una cifra non indifferente e oggi domani dovranno tenere anche conto di quello che uno ci ha speso.

Dr. DE MASI

Ma queste sono comodità che lei comunque riavrebbe! perché le nuove case avranno le vasche da bagno .....

Si quello va bene, ma bisogna vedere se l'affitto rimane sempre quello che uno sta pagando adesso.

Dr. DE MASI

Io non lo so, ma credo che le case a riscatto costino per forza più delle case..... perché le case a riscatto restano a chi ci abita, quindi per forza.....

Ma bene, ma sempre alle condizioni e alle possibilità della persona che ci abita, se non è in quelle condizioni da poterli pagare questi soldi come fa? Io almeno credo.....

Dr. DE MASI

Dovete tener conto di una cosa, che attualmente in questo spazio c'è un numero di famiglie molto basso e che in questo spazio ci potrebbe andare stare un numero di famiglie dipendenti della Terni molto più alto, io credo che sia ingiusto che ci siano poche persone a godere di questi benefici, ce ne vogliono di più; siccome sapete che oggi, per costruire le case la cosa che costa di più sono le aree, e la Terni ha quest'area disponibile, e il fatto che questa area se la godono 200 famiglie....

Scusi, ma queste case dove verrebbero costruite, insomma, nelle spalassine già esistenti oppure, non so, ci stanno altre aree o terreno che, non so, fabbricano lì e poi man mano ci mandano gli inquilini...

Dr. DE MASI

E' ovvio che prima cominciano a costruire, poi ci manderebbero quelli che attualmente stanno in queste case, non si resterebbe mai senza casa; è questione di cambiare quando già la prima

Fig. 4 - Two pages of the transcriptions of the interviews with potential inhabitants of the Villaggio supervised by sociologist Domenico De Masi in March 1970. The archival sources on the user participation experiment carried out in Terni are both abundant and very interesting. Their potential for a social or anthropological history of the Villaggio still awaits proper recognition. Source: Archivio Storico Acciai Speciali Terni, Nuovo Villaggio Matteotti, b. 1, *Società Terni. Interviste*, pp. 3-4.

rhetorical argument that has often been associated with twentieth-century architectural modernism, one in which the limited scale of the built realizations is invoked as a testimony of the integrity of the original intentions and their potential ground-breaking character.

#### *Conclusion: an autonomous field of study?*

In the previous pages, I have discussed some of the practices and intellectual tools that architectural historians have mobilized when dealing with a specific research object. To what extent my observations lend themselves to be generalized? Admittedly, the case study I have chosen cannot offer but a limited insight on the complexity of questions evoked by contemporary practices in the field of architectural history. As a canonic Western building attributed to a canonized, male, white architect, it can even be seen as a prototypical incarnation of a type of historical object that radical research strategies recently tend to avoid (Aggregate, 2021: 6-8). However, the interpretations of the competence of architectural historians that I have



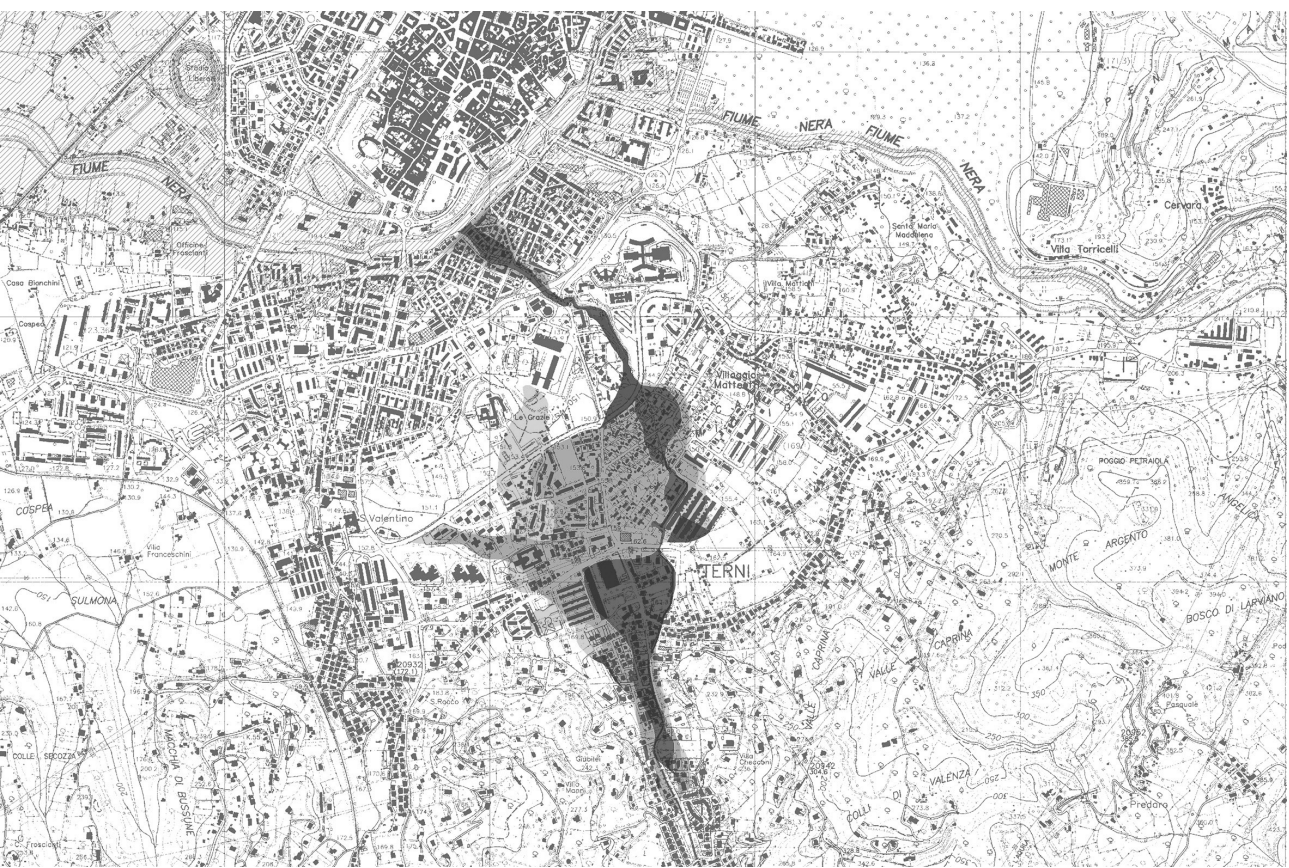
documented arguably enjoy a wide circulation and are representative of a few patterns that can be considered as recurrent, at least within certain geographical and cultural contexts.

These ways of practicing architectural history present significant differences that concern the definition of the research object, the identification and the treatment of sources, and the interpretation of the role of the architectural historian within the architectural community or the society at large. Despite such plurality, my histories have at least one trait in common: they all situate themselves firmly within, or near the perimeter of De Carlo's descriptions of his own building<sup>2</sup>. No matter how divergent the interpretations, they tend to find some resonance in the ways in which the architect himself saw the complex. For example, De Carlo always presented the Matteotti as an exceptional built episode, somehow conceived in opposition to the existing spatial patterns of the city of Terni<sup>3</sup>; accordingly, historians have often understood the building as an isolated object, in many ways unrelated to its urban context. De Carlo conceptualized the Villaggio as a counterexample of Italy's standard practices in the production of public housing; accordingly, historians have avoided discussing those aspects of the history of the complex that were related with ordinary social housing procedures (such as 167 plans: De Pieri, 2022: 105-107). De Carlo and his collaborators – most notably, sociologist Domenico De Masi – have repeatedly insisted on the social relevance of the participatory process and their own role within it (De Carlo, 2013; De Masi, 2020); accordingly, historians have made little efforts to deconstruct these narratives and write a richer social history of the place, despite the abundant sources potentially available to this end. The Villaggio Matteotti was a provocative building at the time of its completion, one that challenged many accepted views: there is indeed a striking contrast between the adventurous nature of the original scheme and the all too respectful approach that historians have chosen when approaching it.

The relationship between architectural history and architectural design was a central aspect of architectural debates and practices over the course of the twentieth century, well exemplified by the diverging views of Italian historians Bruno Zevi – with his understanding

These ways of practicing architectural history present significant differences that concern the definition of the research object, the identification and the treatment of sources, and the interpretation of the role of the architectural historian within the architectural community or the society at large.





of history as a critical tool for contemporary design (Zevi, 1957) – and Manfredo Tafuri, with his late-1960s rejection of “operative criticism” and mid-1980s claim that “there is no criticism, only history” (Tafuri, 1976; Ingersoll, 1986). By the end of the century, partly thanks to the work of a new generation of scholars, the discipline could claim to have achieved a strong autonomy from professional and teaching practices in the field of design, as a separate sector of study with its own academic recognition, its own methods and sources, and its own scientific legitimacy (Leach, 2010: 97-114). The practices I have analyzed, however, pose a number of questions about such a representation and show that the link between historical and professional habits still represents a potentially interesting field of investigation (Cuff, 2017). They document a set of historical competences that should rather be seen as *relatively* autonomous from design, specific in its methods and goals but mostly orbiting around designers’ conceptualization of their own works. Building the competence of historians along such lines presents a few advantages, the relevance of which

should not be dismissed too hastily. Closeness to architects' points of view may help to shape interpretations that are sensitive to the ways in which a building was understood and discussed by the actors that participated in its production (Mancuso, 2015-2016). As these narratives, especially when they concern iconic buildings, tended to enjoy a strong social diffusion – for example, in daily conversations among cultivated practitioners – historians find themselves participating to a knowledge that is shared by many professional and non-professional actors. From this point of view, their work appears to be less about telling than about retelling well-known stories, thus strengthening the intellectual standards of a professional and cultural milieu without undermining its internal cohesion. It also appears less about renewing history's public than about consolidating it. A certain degree of closeness to professional representations can also be a plus in academic environments in which architectural historians provide an education to future architects, a situation that has become increasingly common in those contexts in which architectural history has gained substantial autonomy from art history departments (Crinson, Williams 2019).

We live however in an era in which refining established ways of understanding buildings does not offer fully satisfying answers to the most pressing questions that challenge the very nature and goal of architectural history as a research field (Klein, 2018; Aggregate, 2021). Issues such as globalization, decolonization, new conceptualizations of social differences and inequalities, ecological and climate emergencies, are putting many of the diachronic narratives elaborated over the course of the last century under severe scrutiny (Chattopadhyay, 2015; Çelik, 2018; Cheng, Davis II, Wilson, 2020; Calder, 2021). Faced with the task to broaden and redefine the nature of its research objects, architectural history needs to find ways to return to familiar buildings and places by posing questions that would have been unthinkable for the actors that contributed to shape them (Caccia, Olmo, 2016, 2021). This can imply severing some of the ties that connect historical representations of late modernism to conceptualizations of architecture that are firmly rooted in the intellectual heritage and professional practice of the period. From this point of view,

**Fig. 5 - Detail from a recent map of flood risk in the territory of Terni. The area of the Matteotti Village is associated with moderate risk. Should the extended version of the housing project have been built, it would have insisted on land corresponding to higher risk levels. The entire zone is crossed by an open-air ditch, called *Fosso di Valenza*, that De Carlo's scheme originally proposed to cover. Controversies on the matter marked the implementation of the project around 1972. The image hints at the potential of a future environmental history of the Villaggio.**  
Source: Autorità di Bacino del Fiume Tevere, *Piano stralcio di assetto idrogeologico, Fasce e rischio idraulico sul reticolo secondario e minore*, tav. PB96, May 2018. [Online]. Available at: [https://www.abtevere.it/sites/default/files/datisito/TAV\\_PB96.pdf](https://www.abtevere.it/sites/default/files/datisito/TAV_PB96.pdf).

**Architectural history needs to find ways to return to familiar buildings and places by posing questions that would have been unthinkable for the actors that contributed to shape them.**

an icon of twentieth-century architectural design like the Villaggio Matteotti has many hidden stories left to tell and could become a fruitful field of experimentation for histories capable to renew their dialogue (or conflict) with architectural design along more radical and imaginative lines.

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