Damiano Di Mele
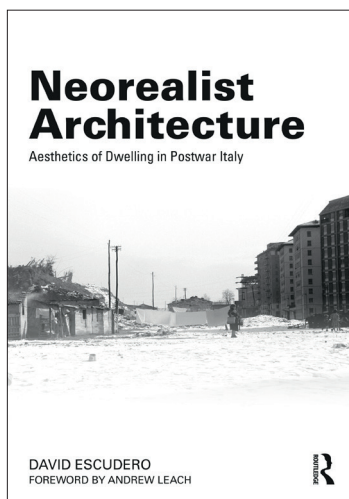**Architecture through the cinematographic lens**

Author: *David Escudero*
Title: *Neorealist Architecture*
Subtitle: *Aesthetics of Dwelling in Postwar Italy*
Language: *english*
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Rome, 1947. The cultural climate of the city, which emerges in the pages of the book *Neorealist Architecture* (fig. 1), oscillates between the desolate misery left by the Second World War and the profound desire for the country's social and economic rebirth. These are the main coordinates that circumscribe the perimeter within which the author moves. The book tells of a path (not always linear) that starts from cinema to arrive at architecture through images of the re-construction of the country. It is a path that follows a "free logic" in which the starting point and the arrival point are sometimes reversed. This dialectic offers the reader the possibility of being persuaded, if necessary, by the film's scripts or by the architectural narration.

There are books that narrate in biographical form the intense career of one or more architects, others that specify the shapes and geometries of their design strategies, still others that reveal the hidden face of great works. Finally, there are others, (as in this case), which reconstruct the historical and cultural memory of a now forgotten place. David Escudero, author of the monograph – on which this review is based – is an architect and professor at the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. Through the pages of the book, he attempts to redefine and expand the boundaries of architectural culture by placing emphasis on its relationship with cinematography. The combination – architecture and cinema – undoubtedly plays an important role among the themes developing in the contemporary architectural debate. By virtue of this, Escudero's book gives the scientific community (and not only) a new possibility of "narration" in architecture. A narrative that seems to move between a film script and rigorous, scientific archive research. He manages to freeze the images and scenes of the selected films by analyzing some architectural episodes. The objective is to ensure that the latter, even unconsciously, are perceived as an integral part of the cultural and intellectual proposal of the film. In this regard, Colin Rowe's considerations on the theme of "narration" come to mind: he underlines, for example, how the story of modern architecture is often more interesting than its products[1].

In the Italian post-war period, the desire for reconstruction begins to manifest itself in various fields of the cultural panorama: in cinema, in architecture, in art and literature. A new current called "Neorealism" appears. In

the words of Stefania Parigi:

«Neorealism runs through the history of Italian cinema and culture like a sort of ghost. It is continually evoked both by those who want to destroy its mythology and by those who seek to recover and reactivate it in the dynamics of contemporaneity»[2].

The term Neorealism, however, has distant origins, which are difficult to ignore in order to understand its deep roots. In this regard, it is necessary to recall the first communicative operations of Italian culture by Massimo Bontempelli who, since the 1920s, tended to mix «always a little bit of heaven with the things of the earth and mystery with the most precise realities»[3]. Again in 1927, Bontempelli – about twenty years before the exploits of Neorealism – developed an ambitious publishing program (never completed) with the aim of publishing around sixty novels aimed at popularizing a new narrative genre. As Francesco De Nicola recalls: «Bontempelli had identified a new line, that wise mixture of elements oscillating between reality and magic a little later called "magical realism"»[4]. By abandoning those narrative models that tended to ignore everyday normality, we wanted to regain contact with reality, albeit magical. The common goal was to show the face of reality that the regime, also through cinema, was trying to eclipse[5].
To date, therefore, David Escudero, as an "author" who takes on the role

Fig. 3
Children at the Campo Nomentano, Rome, February 1956. Ph. Italo Insolera. Courtesy by Anna Maria Bozzola Insolera.

of "director", uses the camera as a necessary tool to activate a critical and interpretative process. He recognizes in cinema that art capable of giving three-dimensionality to architectural works which he has intended to analyze since the beginning of his research. Thanks to the dynamic and reconfiguring power of the camera, Escudero reveals accurate details and cuts out suggestive sequences in movement. Finally, as in a perfect montage, he reassembles the fragments in sequence in the book. As we can see, the images that summarize the meaning of Neorealism are dynamic, narrative, thematic and sometimes even consolatory. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish project images, whether they are photographs or film stills. As Andrew Leach underlines in the preface to the book, Escudero's meticulous research in the post-war years is necessary today «for better or for worse, to put the architecture of that time back in its place»[6].

The book opens, in perfect neorealist style, with a narration and dialogue taken from the film "L'onorevole Angelina" (1947) set in the Roman village of Pietralata. The author uses this device to introduce the reader to the context and lead him on the journey. The book is orchestrated on three distinct levels which recall autonomous approaches to the theme in which, only in the end, do they tend to align to give rise to a single imaginary. The first part, entitled "Towards a Concept: Neorealist Architecture", introduces the reader to the birth of the neorealist current and traces the theoretical and methodological foundations on which the case studies stand firmly. In the second chapter "A Neorealist Making in Architecture", Escudero stages the initiatives that reformulate the place of living, in this case with limited resources. For example, among the case studies, it analyzes the drawings of some projects carried out following the intervention plan of the Italian State (INA-Casa), in force between 1949 and 1963. This "great machine" favors the construction of housing distributed over the entire national territory. The author explores seven architectural episodes, bringing out among others the works of Adalberto Libera, Mario Ridolfi and Ludovico Quaroni. Finally, in the last part "Neorealist Images of Architecture" the individual works are freed from any prejudice and explored through everyday life. In this section, drawings emerge, but above all photographs that portray the places and spaces intended for the community (fig. 2-3). The author sheds light on the theme through a historical narrative – drama-

tic and comforting at the same time – with the aim of bringing out an architectural language that has perhaps now been forgotten. It is a language which, filtered through the cinematic lens: on the one hand tells the needs and current events of a suffering people, on the other it attempts to overcome the profound pain (fig. 4).

Note

[1] Cfr. Rowe C., *The Architecture of Good Intention*, Academy Edition, London 1994.
[2] Parigi S., *Neorealismo. Il nuovo cinema del dopoguerra*, Marsilio Editori, Venice 2014.
[3] M. Bontempelli, Superbia, "'900", 6 (1928), pp. 1-2.
[4] F. De Nicola, *Neorealismo*, Editrice Bibliografica, Milan 1996 p. 8.
[5] Cfr. M. Guerra (edit by), *Invenzioni dal vero. Discorsi sul neorealismo*, Edizioni Diabasis, Parma 2015.
[6] A. Leach, *Foreword*, in D. Escudero, *Neorealist Architecture. Aesthetics of Dwelling in Postwar Italy*, Routledge, London 2023, p. XII.