

045 Ricostruzione Edilizia The Postwar Neighborhoods of the Ina-Casa Plan

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A desolate and romantic shot of the Baths of Caracalla opens the 1952 documentary film *045 Ricostruzione Edilizia*. Ominous music plays in the background as we see among the rubble laundry lines and men building walls that divide one makeshift home from another. Here, in one of the hallowed archaeological sites of Rome, the narrator explains, families have been living for the last seven years. Our attention is drawn to the family in #045, a couple with two small children. The zero of #045 marks that this is an “abusive” or illegal dwelling. The camera pans out and we see neighborhoods around the city, Parioli and Monte Mario, full of temporary and dilapidated shantytowns. The narrator asks, “How did this happen in Italy?” The answer: the drive to win the war, or as the narrator puts it, the fascist cry: “vincere, vincere, vincere” (win, win, win). The Second World War eroded the fabric of civil society in Italy, leaving millions homeless, desperate, hungry, and unemployed.¹

Later in the film, the camera appears to focus on another crumbling structure. Now, however, the narrator explains that these are not ancient ruins, but present day Cassino, a city outside of Rome that was heavily bombed during the war. In fact, two million habitable rooms were destroyed in Italy during the Second World War, while another four million were damaged.² The wartime devastation exacerbated an already formidable housing shortage; under Fascism, housing construction had consistently failed to meet demand. After the war, internal migration intensified pressure on the inadequate housing stock. By 1945, five million new habitable rooms were needed. In response to

this demand, as the narrator of the film explains, the Ina-Casa plan was established to “ameliorate the housing deficit from north to south.”

Named after the national insurance agency (Istituto Nazionale d’Assicurazione or INA) that provided the financing, the Ina-Casa plan created housing and jobs throughout the nation. Given the severe housing shortage, the residential construction industry was viewed by the minister of Labor and Social Security, Amintore Fanfani as an ideal arena in which to rapidly create jobs for the masses of skilled and unskilled laborers who were out of work. At the same time, under Fanfani’s Ina-Casa plan, workers could build hundreds of thousands of dwellings for those living in desperate conditions. The plan was not only geographically vast, but the sheer number of new homes constructed in a short span of time was impressive. By the time the plan ended in 1963, nearly 400,000 homes had been built. Half of the families assigned to Ina-Casa homes were like the family at #045 in the Baths of Caracalla: living in shacks, refugee camps, caves, basements, or with other families.³ Towards the end of the film, the family from the Baths of Caracalla reappears and the audience learns that they were waiting for someone from the city administration to assign them a new home. As the film ends, we watch our family entering their new Ina-Casa home, #12— without a preceding zero.

Comparatively speaking, the Ina-Casa plan is arguably one of the most successful and little known reconstruction programs of the twentieth century. Sixty years after the Ina-Casa plan began, the neighborhoods created by it are still standing and

are, in most cases, thriving communities; some are even beloved by their residents. One of the primary reasons for their success can be traced to the architectural and urban design of the neighborhoods.

Cities devastated by natural disasters or war, such as Cassino, Rome and New Orleans, have often been viewed afterwards as blank slates upon which architects are free to envision entirely new cities and societies. The neighborhoods of Ina-Casa provide a compelling exception to the *tabula rasa* approach to reconstruction. At its core the Ina-Casa plan was characterized, particularly in its first seven-year phase, by an approach to design that has been called regional, neo-vernacular or neo-realist.⁴ Instead of viewing the destruction wrought across the country by war as an opportunity for entirely new forms and designs, the administrators and architects of the Ina-Casa plan took the opposite approach. The administration illustrated their contextual approach to design in a series of design guidelines which were intended to outline expectations for architects entering Ina-Casa design competitions.⁵ The guidelines instructed designers to take inspiration from the local context including traditional construction methods, locally available materials and even the habits and customs of the people. Existing buildings and trees on the site as well as natural features—every hill and gully—were to be integrated into the design. This mandate resulted in neighborhoods that are incredibly diverse architecturally because they draw on the particular characteristics of their sites. A close look at two Ina-Casa projects, in Alberobello and Bologna, illustrates how this contextual approach to design played out in practice, while at the same time unveiling some of the tensions between modernity and tradition beneath the surface of these designs.

During the first seven-year phase of Ina-Casa (1949–56) Renato Venturi designed a housing project in Alberobello in the Puglia region of southern Italy. Alberobello is most famous for its *trulli*, an indigenous building type with a distinctive cone-shaped roof constructed from dry stacked flagstone. The walls of the *trulli* are usually covered in white plaster, hiding the limestone blocks beneath them, while the grey stone of the roofs is left exposed, giving the city a distinctive profile of pointed roofs against the sky. In contrast, the flat white walls meet the streets squarely.



Figure 1. *Trulli* of Alberobello, Puglia.

The Ina-Casa neighborhood designed by Venturi is comprised of just three buildings containing nineteen dwelling units, centered on a small green.⁶ A two-story block of townhouses is on the east side of the green, a line of single-story row-houses on the north, and a three-story building of flats on the west. The roofs are pitched gables that were originally covered in tile with a stone edging. In trying to create a neighborhood that evoked the local traditions, Venturi did not resort to a simple copying of the most distinctive feature of the *trulli*, cone-shaped roof forms. Instead he relied on various techniques of appropriation to create a project that fluctuates between mimicry and an allusion towards Alberobello and its *trulli*.

First and most obviously, Venturi drew on the local materials and methods of construction: like the *trulli*, the walls are built from limestone blocks and finished with white plaster. Instead of stone, the roofs are ceramic tile, but the edges are lined by a narrow stacked stone border similar to that of *trulli*. The scale of the neighborhood does not exactly match that of Alberobello's older quarters; instead the buildings here are taller, with larger windows and doors. Yet this project retains the sense of intimacy and enclosure found in the city. The housing blocks do not exceed three stories and are relatively short in length. The individual units are articulated by voids and projections helping to break down the overall scale of the façades, thus complementing the flat white plaster walls that make a more formal reference to the existing cityscape. The use of traditional materials, construction methods, and



Figure 2. Ina-Casa Alberobello.

scale together begin to create a fusion of tactile and visual stimuli inspired by that of the *trulli*.

Similarly, the high pitch of the gable roof on the two-story row-houses recalls the angle of the cone-shaped roofs of the *trulli*. But here in the roof form Venturi turns to what I call an experiential reference rather than a formal copying.⁷ In other words, rather than directly adopting a traditional form, Venturi has attempted to recreate the experience without using the cone form itself. Although the Ina-Casa roofs are rather different from the *trulli* roofs, they make a similar impression on the viewer: both the pitched gable roofs of the Ina-Casa row-houses and the steep cone-shaped roofs of the *trulli* have equivalent profiles against the sky. The Ina-Casa project thus mimics the rooflines of the *trulli* in a gestural way; the experience of walking through the streets of Alberobello is recreated in the way the peaks of the highly pitched roofs of Ina-Casa meet the sky and in the alteration of taller and shorter peaks even though the roof slope is only two directional rather than a 360-degree cone.

Venturi's Ina-Casa project in Alberobello thus demonstrates five different techniques of appropriation that can be used to make reference to the existing urban context and architectural forms: the use of traditional construction methods, the use of traditional materials, similar scale, the adaptation of pre-existing formal elements, and an experiential reference. Despite these appropriations the project does not come across as overly nostalgic, but rather manages to incorporate these traditions in a simple, modern, and original way.

While the Alberobello project was small and integrated into the existing urban fabric, Ina-Casa also constructed entirely new neighborhoods on the peripheries of large cities. The Borgo Panigale neighborhood in Bologna illustrates how this contextual approach to design played out at a larger scale, in the design of a new quarter on the periphery of the city.

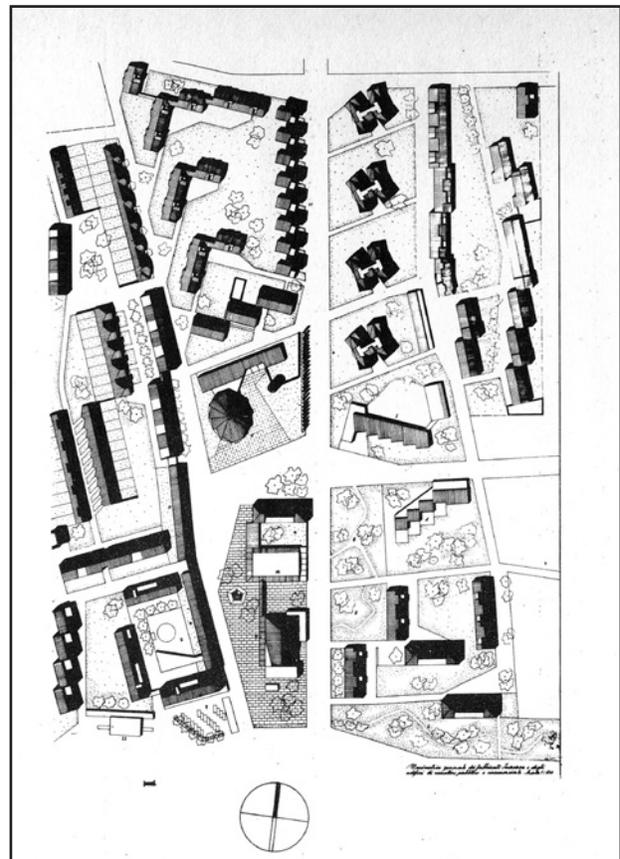


Figure 3. Site plan of Borgo Panigale, Bologna with the church shown as an oval plan. (the final design was circular) and the cinema, which was never constructed at the bottom center of the site plan.

The Bolognese architect Giuseppe Vaccaro led the design team of Borgo Panigale, which is comprised of twenty-two buildings including a commercial area, a church, elementary and nursery schools, two-story row-houses, and three-, four-, and five-story blocks of flats. In the plan of the neighborhood we see that the streets are straight but at oblique angles to one another, giving the quarter a somewhat casual character. The buildings address the street in a variety of ways but often have façades that are not parallel to the street. Even when the façades are aligned with the street, as in the case of the commercial area, the street turns slightly, forcing the building to bend along the line of the road. Despite such outwardly random and varied arrangements of buildings and streets, there is also an underlying, though not readily apparent, order in the arrangement of the buildings within the quarter. The five-story blocks, for example, have a complicated relationship to the street: they are skewed about fifteen degrees from the line of the street. Yet because there are four of these blocks with the same orientation, there is a sense of order within this random geometry, an order found in the repetition of the buildings along the street. Walking through the neighborhood or looking at the plan, one's initial impression is of a haphazard or unorganized urbanism. But upon experiencing the neighborhood a little further, or studying the plan a little closer, one uncovers ordering systems created through the playful use of geometry, repetition, and rhythm.



Figure 4. The five-story blocks at Borgo Panigale, Bologna, with clotheslines on top.

This uneasy union of order and disorder is also found in the way in which the buildings relate

to each other. On the western edge of the neighborhood, for example, there are two short blocks of two-story row-houses facing each other across a small street. At first glance, there seems to be little relation between the two buildings. One zig-zags along the street, while the other has a nearly solid façade bordering the street. Upon closer inspection, however, a relationship between the two buildings is evident; the entry voids carved out of the brick building are at angles parallel to the white zig-zagging building across the street. Thus the voids create a dialogue between the two and reveal a sense of order within the seemingly haphazard design.

Vaccaro's team incorporated different types of traditions in the urban and architectural design of the public buildings for Borgo Panigale. The commercial street has arcaded walkways, created by carving out the ground level beneath the building above. It borrows directly from the arcade-lined streets of Bologna, which protect pedestrians from traffic and weather, a fitting re-use by Vaccaro, a native son. The church building similarly draws on Italian precedents, both in terms of form and in its relationship to the site; it is a low, circular building of poured concrete with a copper roof. Both the materials and form stand out in distinction to the rest of the neighborhood. It is located in the central space of the quarter, where on one side it is bounded by the arcaded shopping street and on another by two school buildings. Thus the orientation and location of the church, combined with its nearly circular form, uses an urban typology that dates back to the Italian Renaissance and Alberti's treatise of 1485. As most clearly illustrated by *The Ideal City* painting, Renaissance planning required that the most important building type, the church, be round and located in the central piazza of the city. Circling the piazza should be other important public buildings, including the townhall, other churches, and the private houses of the most important citizens.

By the 1950s this urban design was probably not so much a direct reference to Alberti's text or the painting, but was rather a part of an Italian planning lexicon. For example, under the Fascist regime this tradition was at times altered by replacing the church with the state. In the new town of Littoria (now Latina), for example, the

central piazza was home to the buildings of the regime, while the main church was relegated to a secondary piazza. In Borgo Panigale, Vaccaro returns to the earlier tradition by constructing a circular church and placing it in the center of the main piazza. Yet Vaccaro departs from tradition by using poured concrete and innovative details such as the sculptural concrete columns and ceiling.

The materials used in the residential buildings of Borgo Panigale are rather simple; most of the buildings are either white or warm shades of plaster, with wooden shutters and tiled roofs. A stone or brick base runs along the lower edges of the walls. In terms of form, the residential buildings tend to have simple massings that incorporate oblique or irregular angles, similar to the geometries seen in the urban relationships. A block of two-story row-houses, for example, has an unadorned façade that is broken into small angled planes, creating a sense of folding along the road. The roof planes bend up and down in tandem with the undulations of the façade. An analogous play between geometry and form is evident in the five-story buildings. Each block is comprised of two wings joined by a central stair and utility core; within each wing, there are two dwelling units oriented at slight angles to one another. Where the two units of each wing meet in the façade, a balcony is carved out, creating a void filled only by a thin wall plane separating the two spaces. The balcony rails are at yet another slightly different angle to the building, to each other, and to the actual balconies. Thus the forms of the buildings incorporate the same sort of formal game playing, mixing order and disorder, pattern and break.

There is one additional feature of note in the five-story blocks: the communal *stenditore* or clotheslines are incorporated into the buildings as design elements. Rather than being hidden behind high parapet walls, the *stenditore* here are raised on rooftop platforms exposed for all to see. This crowning of the buildings with clotheslines shows a veneration of the mundane and small details of everyday life, and is part of what led to an association between this architecture and the wider cultural movement of Neo-realism.⁸

The team of designers led by Vaccaro appropriated architectural traditions at Borgo Panigale in a number of ways: the shifting and varied streetscapes that

recall traditional urban patterns without directly mimicking them; the use of traditional materials and construction methods; the use of a domestic vernacular; and the pedestrian scale. In part, this approach is due to the guidelines set forth by the Ina-Casa administration and the larger goal of job creation. That traditional building methods were more labor intensive was viewed as a positive effect.

Yet this turn towards regionalism, even localism, in the designs also reflects something of the political context of postwar Italy and the fact that modernism was tainted by its association with Fascism immediately after the war. Consequently many designers who had practiced in a modernist or rationalist vein in the 1930s had to reinvent their approach to design in the postwar years. Most of the architects involved with Ina-Casa had either been schooled under Fascism or matured as practitioners while working on projects for the regime. In the postwar political climate, these architects had to reconsider their approach to design. The same was true for those architects who were never committed Fascists, since it was likely that they had absorbed some of those elements associated with the fallen regime. The struggle of post-colonial governments charged with building projects has been characterized as a conflict between practical and ideological goals, "the pressure to start fresh and the pressure to reuse colonial structures and languages of power."⁹ In Italy, architects confronted similar pressures in regards to Fascism both at the level of government administration and at a more personal level. The pressure to rebuild quickly and efficiently provided a powerful argument in favor of some degree of continuity. At the same time, designers had to rethink what exactly were the political implications of their own process of design and of the forms and styles they created. The changed political climate was reflected in the design guidelines of Ina-Casa, which contained explicit warnings against using Italian Rationalism. This dismissal of Italy's modern style created a dilemma: what do you do if you are an architect who has been practicing in a rationalist vein?¹⁰

According to his daughter, Vaccaro, the lead architect of Borgo Panigale, was never a committed supporter of Fascism, but like many Italian architects he did work for both the Fascist and Christian

Democrat governments.¹¹ His most memorable works for the Fascist regime are the central post office in Naples and a summer camp in Cesenatico on the Adriatic coast, both of which are marked by a grandiose scale, minimal ornamentation, and a severity or crispness of form. At first glance, Borgo Panigale appears drastically different from these earlier works; it is scaled to pedestrians, the details are rustic, and the forms playful. A closer look, however, reveals similarities and continuities between the design of Borgo Panigale and Vaccaro's earlier projects, specifically in the use of geometry, repetition, and formal manipulation. A brief comparison with the Colonia Marina (1936–38), a children's holiday camp at Cesenatico, illustrates these continuities as well as differences.



Figure 5. Colonia AGIP, Cesenatico.

The Cesenatico Colonia has a central five-story building with two smaller scale wings.¹² The main building, a long horizontal block, seems to float above the site; it is raised on pilotis with smooth white and black stone and long ribbon windows. Orthogonal relationships characterize the design as a whole and in its parts: everything seems to be either parallel or perpendicular to the seashore. The materials, masonry and glass, repeat this regular geometry with joint lines and window mullions falling in alignment. The composition is driven by the geography of the sea, as evident in the final elevation design, which emphasizes the horizontal line of the sea though the use of ribbon windows in contrast to an earlier scheme that had individual square windows.

Both the Cesenatico Colonia and Borgo Panigale experiment with geometrical relationships between

buildings and parts of buildings; the difference between the two is a matter of their extent and how such order is experienced by the visitor. At Cesenatico the regularity in the design is overwhelming: the orthogonal theme is carried relentlessly into every detail. At Borgo Panigale, the use of drafting board games is more playful and experimental. The order is perceivable by the individual visitor, but within an irregular larger framework. It is this lively play between rhythm and relief that is hard to find in Vaccaro's earlier projects. At Borgo Panigale, he tempers the geometrical games so they are legible to the visitor without ever being engulfing or overwhelming.

Pervasive throughout the design of Borgo Panigale, from the urban design to the domestic and public buildings, is a play between tradition and modernity. When the materials and details are traditional, the compositional strategies are contemporary, and vice versa. This tension between looking backwards and moving forwards is best exemplified in Borgo Panigale but it persists throughout the projects of Ina-Casa. What Borgo Panigale demonstrates, then, is one way in which an architect mediated between the need for continuity in his own design practices and the pressure to start over, to create something distinctively post-Fascist and, at the same time, undeniably Italian. Vaccaro resolved these competing aims by mixing his own modernist design approach with traditional urban design principles and the vernacular dressing of Ina-Casa.

The reasons for the success of Ina-Casa neighborhoods are numerous and complex, but foremost among them, particularly in regards to the first phase, is the contextual approach to design, which resulted in the design of neighborhoods rooted in local traditions. These neighborhoods continue to thrive because there is no stigma created by the architecture; they look related to their surroundings. Most have fluid boundaries between the working class neighborhood of Ina-Casa and the surrounding areas. In other words, it is precisely because they are not distinctive, flashy, attention getters, because they blend in with their surroundings, that they are successful. The scale is humane and the exterior forms, details, and materials are understandable to the new inhabitants.

What lessons can we take from the neighborhoods of Ina-Casa in regards to reconstruction projects

today? Although shortly after the plan ended the Ina-Casa approach to design was derided by critics for being regressive or nostalgic, with sixty years of perspective the plan can be viewed in a different light. What was, in the 1950s, considered backwards—both technologically and stylistically—today might be considered a sort of slow architecture movement in the spirit of the slow food movement. By utilizing locally available materials and traditional construction methods, the designers of Ina-Casa were able to model a low-tech approach to design and construction. They did so without resorting to overt historicism or stylistic pastiches. Moreover, the architects and administrators of Ina-Casa were able to successfully exploit the processes of design and construction for social aims. By conceptualizing of the role of architecture in society in terms far broader than just form and style, the architects and administrators were able to integrate two enormous social agendas—the construction of new homes for thousands of families and the creation of thousands of jobs for Italians from north to south. At the same time the contextual approach to design resulted in the creation of lively and lasting communities.

ENDNOTES

1. Vittorio Sala, *045 Ricostruzione Edilizia* (Rome: Luce). To view the film go to Istituto Luce's website: www.luce.it. According to Leonardo Ciacci the film was one of four made to commemorate the first departure of the "Train of rebirth." See Leonardo Ciacci, "Una casa per tutti: La mise en scene del piano Ina-Casa," in *La Grande Ricostruzione: Il Piano Ina-Casa e l'Italia degli anni cinquanta*, ed. Paola Di Biagi (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2001). All translations by author unless otherwise noted.
2. The best primary source on the Ina-Casa plan is Luigi Beretta Anguissola, *I 14 anni del piano Ina-Casa*, (Roma: Staderini, 1963), 7. The best secondary source is Paola di Biagi, ed, *La Grande Ricostruzione: Il Piano Ina-Casa e l'Italia degli anni cinquanta* (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2001).
3. Beretta Anguissola, 32.
4. The Ina-Casa plan was divided into two seven-year phases, 1949–56 and 1956–63. This paper focuses on the approach to design and neighborhoods of the first phase. While the first phase was marked by a contextual approach to design, by the second phase larger scale projects more modernist in character were permitted under the plan.
5. 1. *Suggerimenti, norme, e schemi per la elaborazione e presentazione dei progetti: Bandi dei concorsi*. 1949. Roma: F. Damasso, 2. *Suggerimenti, esempi e norme per la progettazione urbanistica: Progetti tipo*. 1950. Roma: F. Damasso.
6. On Venturi's project in Alberobello see Luigi Beretta Anguissola, "Bari: Nucleo edilizio ad Alberobello," in *I 14 anni del Piano INA-CASA* (Roma: Staderini, 1963), 354.
7. I use the term "experiential reference" for instances when designers sought to mimic or recreate a particular spatial experience usually through form, building and street orientation, and scale. The Ina-Casa architects do not discuss this technique explicitly, but it can be found in many Ina-Casa projects. At the time, however, planners, theorists, and architects such as Kevin Lynch and Steen Eiler Rasmussen were experimenting with similar ideas based on their direct observations of cities. More research is needed to establish whether there was any connection between these architects and Ina-Casa. See, for example, Kevin Lynch, *The image of the city*, Publications of the Joint Center for Urban Studies (Cambridge, Mass.: Technology Press, 1960). See also Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing architecture*, (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1964).
8. On the connections between neorealism and Ina-Casa see Maristella Casciato, "Neorealism in Italian Architecture," in *Anxious Modernisms: experimentation in postwar architectural culture*, ed. Sarah Williams and Rejean Legault Goldhagen (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2000); Maristella Casciato, "L'invenzione della realta": realismo e neorealismo nell'Italia degli anni cinquanta," in *La Grande Ricostruzione: Il Piano Ina-Casa e l'Italia degli anni cinquanta*, ed. Paola Di Biagi (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2001); Bruno. Reichlin, "Figures of Neorealism in Italian Architecture (Part 1)," *Grey Room* 05, no. (2001).
9. Lawrence Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, (Yale University Press, 1992), 10.
10. On Vaccaro in the postwar period see Pier Giorgio Massaretti, "Storiografia vaccariana nel nodo della ricostruzione post-bellica," in *Architetture per Bologna* (Bologna: Editrice Compositori, 2006).
11. Interview with Carolina Vaccaro, June 2006. On the relationship between architects and Fascist politics see Nicoloso, *Gli architetti di Mussolini: Scuole e sindacato, architetti e massoni, professori e politici negli anni del regime*.
12. Umberto Cao, *Giuseppe Vaccaro: Colonia marina a Cesenatico (1936-38)*, (Roma: CLEAR, 1994).