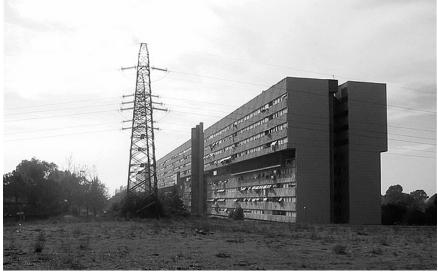The Telegraph

# Utopian Adventure: The Corviale Void by Victoria Watson: review

**What to do with unloved public housing projects is a perennial source of controversy and debate. Those assertive, post-War concrete giants prompt apoplexy throughout much of middle England, with dynamite and wrecking balls often the preferred solution. In the final chapter of a new book, architect and historian Victoria Watson proposes an extraordinary use for the defining feature of a grim Italian estate - fill it with millions of robot beetles.**



Italian job: the giant housing block at the Corviale, with its central void slicing through the rear facade of the building

By Brian Stater

5:49PM BST 13 Apr 2012

Comment (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/9203253/Utopian-Adventure-The-Corviale-Void-by-Victoria-Watson-review.html#disqus_thread)

The Corviale development, on the outskirts of Rome, was begun in 1972 and completed 10 years later. It houses around 6,000 people. In *'Utopian adventure: The Corviale Void'* Watson admits; "Amongst the people of Rome, the Corviale tends to be looked upon with contempt, its inhabitants especially finding it objectionable."

The estate's main building is arrow-straight and 11 storeys high. It is just over half a mile in length. The most extraordinary feature is a void that runs the entire length of the main block, plunging from the roof right down to the ground and slicing the building in two.

Watson's proposal, which Rome's planners will be relieved to hear is more theoretical than practical, is to use this unloved site as an opportunity to experiment with progressive architectural theory. Watson's suggestion, of releasing limitless numbers of beetles into the Corviale void, would transform this dark and irrational site into a vibrant colour form. The void would also become a proving-ground for her writing on the theory of colour and representation which occupies the earlier chapters.

Watson closes her book with beetles, having opened it with bees. These occur in an introductory quotation from Karl Marx, who observed that the fundamental distinction between the busiest bee and the laziest architect is that the latter "raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality." The bee, says Marx, just gets on and builds it.

It is the occurence of structures in architects' imagination, and how they are expressed and disseminated, that Watson explores through a combination of broad historical survey and reflections upon her own work.

Sabbioneta Cryptic City by James Madge: review (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8720649/Sabbioneta-Cryptic-City-by-James-Madge-review.html)

She begins with the observation that architecture "involves moments of utopia"--for the architect, that is, rather than the client -- which occur with an idea, and must then be worked upon if it is to be expressed in material form. Watson argues that the process of architectural production reduces an architect's ideas to commodities (Marx is a significant influence on this analysis), which means that many architects "must find some other place in which to work."

That "other place" is, mostly, occupied by drawing, and writing, and Watson embarks upon a persuasive survey of some of the great figures from the history of both architecture and art. She explores the ideas and means of expression of, among others, Brunelleschi, Piranesi and Yves Klein. Watson describes her regret that she was taught nothing of the science of representation during her architectural training in the 1980s. Today's students, if similarly frustrated, might do well to read her brief and absorbing account of Brunelleschi's demonstrations of perspective. Her analysis of Piranesi shows that he, too, holds much for a contemporary audience beyond the dark and rather forbidding architectural fantasies with which he is often associated.

With Yves Klein, the mid-20th Century French avant-garde artist, Watson moves on from drawing and writing as the location of that "other place" in which architects work towards what Klein calls "sensibility". That is, a perception that architecture can be as much about aesthetic response as it is about thought, or conventional visual analysis. To many readers and students, Klein is perhaps more readily associated with unconventional art than architecture, but Watson draws on his 1950s project The Architecture of the Air to explore his contribution to her own discipline.

Klein's work gives Watson her strongest link from historical reflection to contemporary practice. She introduces elements of her own work, in particular the Air Grid which, she claims, opens up new areas of the "other place". At first glance an Air Grid is somewhere between a model and a sculpture. A typical grid might stand 500mm tall and is formed by stretching multiple lengths of brightly coloured thread between two, three or four vertical faces. The Air Grid can also be produced, in digital form, on a computer. The effect of an Air Grid, particularly if examined closely, is to take the observer into disturbing territory, which is precisely Watson's intention. The grid begins to appear as something different and new, evoking the feeling that one is looking into a new kind of material form. In Watson's phrase, the colour lattice becomes "more air than it is thread". The human eye is easily deceived by the Air Grid, which persuades the viewer that the coloured thread is not inert, but alive.

Her final chapter proposes a further step along the path toward immaterial sensibility, traced by Klein, and the Air Grid. To fill the dark void of a decayed housing project with a new form of artificial intelligence - a single, colour choreography of millions of beetles - and to observe the result, would be a radical experiment in the theory of colour and human perception. A utopian adventure, indeed.

*'Utopian Adventure: The Corviale Void' by Victoria Watson (*Ashgate (http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&calcTitle=1&title_id=9927&edition_id=13370) *, £45)*