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UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

# ISUF

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## The urban forms of contemporary Rome

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Keywords: Rome, Courtyard, Modern, Open.

### Abstract

Rome is the one of the most scenographic cities in Europe and one with the highest number of historical stratifications. To understand contemporary Rome in its outward sprawl, however, means to understand an uncontrolled relationship between order and chaos. Since the postwar period the loss of compactness in urban planning has been occurring with chronological progression resulting in the break-up of its own structuring principle in the city area, which should be understood more as a surrender to rampant overbuilding rather than a search for new models. In the latest years the badly planned city outskirts with their equal-height residential buildings showing no identifiable connection with the "territory" at all represent a considerable change of the urban settlement principle characteristic of the Italian landscape where the idea of beauty was given by the contrast between a building and its natural surroundings resulting in a mutual, organic celebration of both. After the Rome of Pope Sixtus V, the complexity of the Baroque style, the 19th century geometrical precision of the urban fabric, the "suprematist" experiment of E42, the myth of the Mediterranean and of Neorealism, what will we have to do in order to build a new idea of a city anchored to the aspirations of a globally changed society? My conference paper proposal stems from this question as it intends to critically analyze the current meaning of the relationship between the urban and architectural aggregations of Roman monumental features and the urban sprawl as well as modern and contemporary interventions on the international stage which are compatible with the stratification principle and with the theme of "scale jumping" which Rome shows in its consolidated image.

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## Introduction

The perception of Rome's most striking characteristics within the European context shows problematic issues as well as elements of extraordinary importance, these latter forming a fertile heritage which will remain available throughout the future. If, on one hand, it is up to historians and restorers to engage in the study, preservation and accessibility of the artistic and architectonic heritage, on the other hand, it is the designer's task to become sensitive to the idea of historical continuity. This latter does not involve, however, a repetitive revival of pre-existing forms but, rather, a deeper awareness that what is "new" is an integral part of a vast time-stratified network of connections (Giovannoni, 1931). Since the 1930's Rome has expressed the idea of an urban planning designed, with its squares and streets (Sitte, 1889), according to a plan which has been developing since the Renaissance and which across the centuries has ranged from the complex spaces of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Baroque, to the 19<sup>th</sup> century idea of a town characterized by a strictly geometrical grid-pattern, a re-thinking of historicized models and types which characterize the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, down to the architecture of the Fascist period. Each of these "massive historical periods" (Levi-Strauss, 1962) develops its own construction process of the urban space which then become reference models not just as long-lasting motifs to be exploited in the years to come but as models which can be adapted to other contexts.

## Methodology

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The "Rome Model" suggests urban systems at the same time original and universal, some of which stand out and have been handed down to us in a larger size: the medieval urban fabric grafted onto ancient pre-existing structures, the Rome of Julius II and Sixtus V which introduces the structural/spatial element of the "visual axis", the Renaissance model street/square/background/building as in Palazzo Farnese, the many scenographic Baroque spaces, of which Bernini is the most memorable example, though no longer significant after the demolition of "Spina di Borgo" (figure 1), St. Peter's Square and its connection with the channel of Borgo Nuovo (Birindelli, 1981) and the complex system of pre-existing structures (Benevolo, 1990). In the areas of 19<sup>th</sup> century Rome one can still feel a sense of continuity with the historical city, especially in the compact volumes of the buildings, in the continuity of the urban scene and in the layout, in the proportions and the decorations of the windows, which, however, progressively loses its scenographic character that for three centuries connoted the multi-faceted Roman landscape and turns away from the typical exuberance of mediterranean landscapes, which, after all, is not an explicitly characteristic of Rome. Rome's 19<sup>th</sup> century architecture represents a quite delicate turning point, marking the passage to the industrialized city with its new functional requirements caused by urbanization (Insolera, 1962). This is when the Roman skyline starts to change and whole areas start being built in which the façade cornice of a building is perfectly aligned with the ones of its surrounding buildings, as in the areas of Prati or Esquilino areas, where apart from some roof-terraces or corner turrets typical of more prestigious buildings, they give rise to an essentially monotonous skyline. The city surrounded by hills, where, as Ludovico Quaroni remembers (Quaroni, 1969), the view of the pinetrees towers over the tops of the buildings, still elegantly offers itself as a model which is largely widespread in the central European capital cities. Rome's 19<sup>th</sup> century architecture shows the persistence of a neoclassical imitation of the antique, which is no longer so strict but becomes quite eclectic opening itself to contaminations of different styles. A similar traditional tendency can be observed in furniture, where a copy of the original model is used to transfer certain stylistic elements on any type of furniture characterized by a particular style. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it can be said that "creating is narrating" (Sonnet, 2014) in the sense that by renewing itself the whole historical heritage does not cancel but, rather, reinforces in the Eternal City the idea of the antique as the timeless modern, a concept that later on the Modernist cultural movement will assume as one of the basic tenets of its vision of Rome. Historical plans play an important role in

**Figure 1.** Ideal reconstruction of "Borgo Nuovo" in Rome, Massimo Zammerini 1991, thesis in architecture.



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this idea of creating as narrating and they prove especially useful in tracing successive intentions and visions. Rome plans build a thematic narrative. Thus, we have plans by Bufalini dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century showing the Borghi/Trastevere axis (1559), those by Lavinio Cruyl, going back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century (1665), which show geometric abstraction in the relation between built and natural environments, while others by Matteo Gregorio De Rossi (1668) show the architectural continuum by defining just the block perimeter. We have the fanciful and intentional proportional changes of Tempesta at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (1693), the continuity between the layout of the streets and "internal" spaces, like churches and yards, treated as external spaces by Nolli (1748) and then in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the geometrization of the natural environment in Pietro Ruga (1824) or the shaded drawings of height variations on geometrized green areas by Angelo Uggeri (1826). The historical heritage of Rome plans will then be the object of scientific reconsideration carried out by Saverio Muratori at the Centro Studi di Storia Urbanistica (Centre for Urban History Studies).

**Figure 2.** New buildings and rural complex in the Roman countryside



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### **Forming process**

A compact idea of urban form persists in Italy until the 1940's. As regards the idea of the city itself, all over the world, the hectic cultural life of the 1920's and the concepts of the avant-garde movements partially destroyed the very idea of historical continuity. The industrial revolution had already caused irreversible changes. Architecture undergoes profound changes from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century also because of the spread of new building technologies and the large-scale use of reinforced concrete. The sweeping passage from the building technique of the load-bearing wall to the reinforced-concrete or steel frame and the possibility to easily realize these structures have profoundly transformed the most visible architectural element, that of the façade, which more than others is able to secure a fairly broad consensus and which visually connotes the whole image of the city. In Rome, after the war events had ended the period of the Fascist architecture where the theme of the "new" was expressed by means of a wide range of languages including historicism, the creation of a "Littorio" style (Zammerini, 2002) and Modernism linked to Rationalism (Ciucci, 1989), the rapid transformation from "old" to "new", after the "damnation memoriae", takes place in the total absence of any models and without control. Nowadays the poor quality of constructions has led to a perception of the "new" as "ugly" in opposition to the idea of beauty linked to what is antique. This phenomenon has wasted all the efforts made in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the research projects of the avant-gardes and by the different Modernist movements in the country.

In the reconstruction period Italy missed the great opportunity, given its inability to critically approach the recent past separating architecture from politics while avoiding censorship, to re-think an architecture which had been imposed from above rather than shared and which, however, contains some not fully investigated and obscure aspects. Following the traumatic experience of the Nazi Holocaust, the same concept of rationality is seriously called into question and, as Peter Eisenmann remembers (Falzea, 1993), the western world still hasn't come to terms with the tragedy of the II World War. After

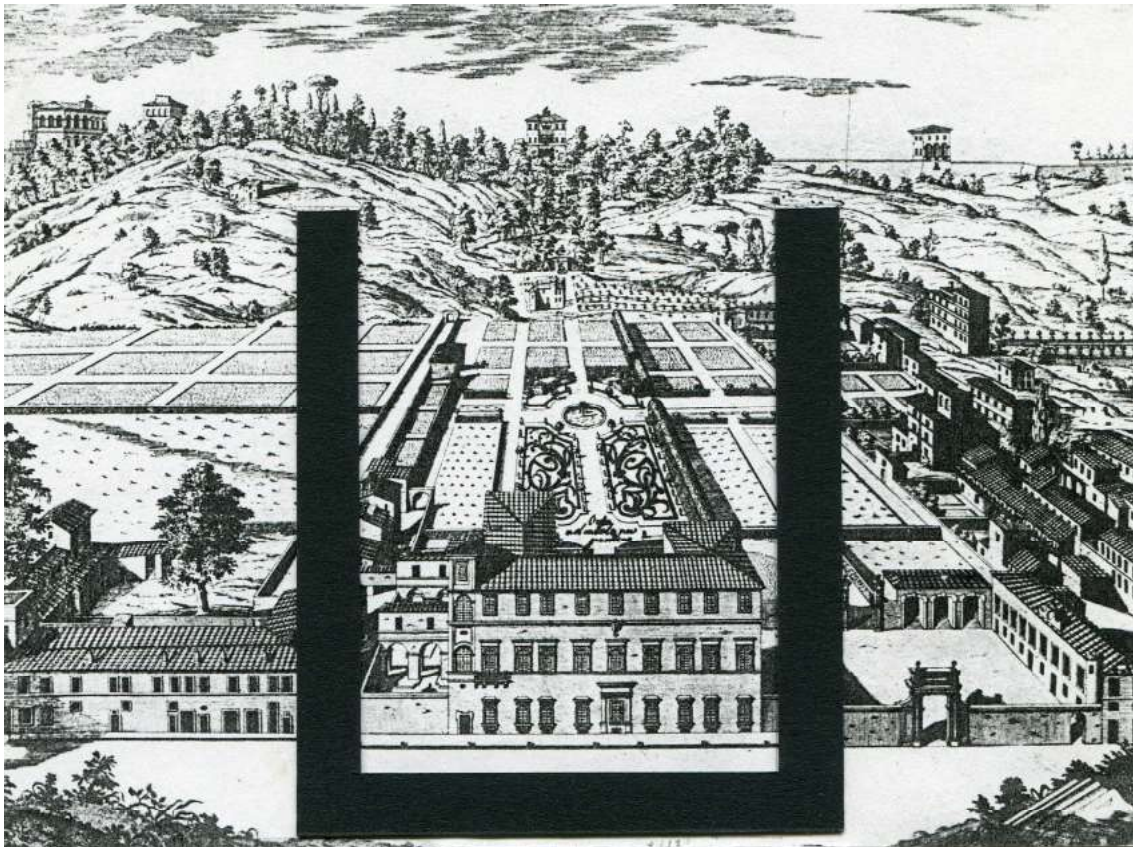


the war, the same great protagonists of this season often choose to live in a condition of seclusion and profound mistrust.

These are the years when the E42 area, that is EUR, is completed. Our analysis of the urban forms of contemporary Rome starts from here, from one of the most difficult cases in our history, which was to create a "second Rome" with multiple objectives and an encyclopedic vocation, which can today be seen in the nearby areas, where well-known spatial and architectural themes originally coexist, and which, though rooted once again in the Roman myth, opens itself to different contaminations. The plan of the area, designed by a team coordinated by Marcello Piacentini and completed by him, with the spaces of the "white city" commissioned to the best architects of the time, shows an extremely complex intention, that is, a new idea of mediterranean city, monumental and stretching out toward the sea through an "architectural" artery, practically a straight axis rhythmically and continuously dotted by the large crowns of pine-trees, today the Via Cristoforo Colombo. One can enter and leave EUR northward and southward through two "urban doors" which from the project phase to their realization underwent many transformations until after the war when they were turned into the two twin buildings designed by Moretti and the "Palazzo dello Sport" designed by Nervi. Both of them are very clear solutions, quite respectful of the original axis plan made by Piacentini and yet quite different in their architectural expression, which belongs to the following period, and can be considered the last two interventions which give evidence of the fact that it is possible to insert new elements with full awareness and respect of the pre-existing urban layout. This latter was quite peculiar as it was founded on the Roman east-west (cardi) and north-south (decumani) street system even though already looking at the outcomes of the research carried out in Europe by the avantgarde movements and by studies in modern city planning. The transverse axes, so called "decumani", with on one end the monumental Palazzo dei Ricevimenti and Palazzo dei Congressi and on the other end the "Colosseo Quadrato" (Square Colosseum) and the second axis of Viale Europa from the Church of Sts Peter and Paul and the Palazzo degli Archivi together with secondary axes give us, when seen from above, an unusual image hovering between an "architecton" by Malevic and the discovered fragments of a Roman city, all in all characterized by the search for an archaic dimension (Muntoni, 2014). Beyond any possible and necessarily hypothetical interpretation of a project which is still partially incomplete, as regards the themes of the urban forms the EUR area is analyzed from a different perspective in today's debate on contemporary Rome. Though largely refused by the Roman citizens for its metaphysical character which discourages any possible identification, still it gives precious indications among which there are some urban planning solutions which rest on an ancient idea, typical of planned cities, of a city that is "well-rooted" in the earth thanks to a marked use of geometrical forms which by contrast gives more emphasis to natural heights.

The following interventions, in which no trace can be found of this particular experience, from the 1950's to the more recent suburban areas, show quite clearly at least four essential problematic issues: the design of the urban layout, the relationships between elevation and soil, the choices of different types of forms and the skyline. The semi-suburban areas located around the ring just outside the historical centre like Monteverde Nuovo, Aurelio, Balduina, Trionfale, Cassia, Talenti, and the large sprawling areas along the ancient consular roads like Casilino, Prenestino, Tuscolano, Appio and in part also Laurentino and Marconi, the former containing small block of flats and the latter containing intensive buildings and thus still inspired by an idea of consolidated city, are characterized by a substantial loss of all those identifying features which for centuries have gradually overlapped in a process of continuous transformation. The architecture of the city, to paraphrase the text by Aldo Rossi (Rossi, 1966), no longer holds or reproduce itself, it does not stratify but generates unprecedented forms. The blocks are built in random order, they do not run parallel to the street and the streets themselves lose their unitary character. The house and the street are separated and become two extraneous elements. This marks the end of the relationship between architecture and city planning, the terrible crime committed in the name of a vulgar idea of unrestrained liberalism which

**Figure 3.** Design interpretation of anonymous of the late 600's with views of the gardens of Palazzo Corsini, Massimo Zammerini 1995



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has its triumph in the period of the economic boom. Even the shape of these blocks, with the exception of a very small number of them designed by very clever architects (Rossi, 1984), is unusual: bond facings, exposed concrete slabs, small cantilever balconies, wobbly and crooked-looking parapets of unknown origin, recessed attics created "according to the rules of procedure" and very often "artful" asbestos-covered French roofs, most of which are turned into penthouses. In the meantime one gets used to separating the word building from the word architecture, paving the way to rampant overbuilding which as a matter of fact is present in every Italian city, disfiguring the harmony and the appearance of the landscape which so far has attracted artists from all over the world who for this very reason have set out on their "Italian journey". Only urban social housing is able to escape this waste. Italian Neorealistic films have used these houses as the ideal background to represent those moods, tragedies and explosions of authentic light-heartedness narrated by De Sica, Visconti, Rossellini and other great figures of this rising brand new seventh art, the many working-class districts, from Trullo to the more recent Quaroni's Tiburtino. They still represent the idea of a city characterized by homogeneous, sometimes even reassuring areas, fully immersed in the neatness of the new and modern buildings, a well-organized, safe city, in short a very simple, compassionate environment, well-designed even in its modest but dignified-looking small gates.

The new suburban areas, instead, are created to make the maximum profit by constructors who do not hesitate to exploit the permitted maximum height (figure 2), proposing always the same type of multi-storey buildings, a featureless layout showing no urban fabric and lots of car roundabouts. We are worlds away from the idea of a morphological relationship open to processes of slow adaptation to new social, functional and technological needs (Caniggia, Maffei, 1984). This seems highly paradoxical in our

contemporary times which are indeed times of change. We should just think of the idea of flexibility required for the spatial distribution of apartments where, mainly thanks to the Internet, people often work from home, or of the crisis of the "stable" family unit, of the opportunity for different generations, or races, to share the same living space, creating new, once unimaginable, models of coexistence. This calls for a historical breakthrough, which has only just started and which forces architects and town planners to experiment with new typo/morphological aggregations in order to develop various models of urban growth. By studying the countries which were the first to face the idea of an organized and peaceful multiracial city, I would like to focus on the Anglo-Saxon case. It is widely known that in the 1960's and 70's Italian architecture looked with great interest at English typo/morphological experiments, like the Barbican, which proposed urban scale, mostly dwelling units equipped with essential services and in some cases also with some smaller buildings to host small museums, libraries, etc., characterized by a mixture of sizes and types of residential buildings to satisfy a variety of demand. Those kind of units suggested the idea of a village with clearly marked boundaries but still accessible from the outside, set in both well-serviced and well-connected areas of urban expansion and within the consolidated city. These experiments were modern remakes of the Anglo-Saxon crescent the first instance of which is the Royal Crescent realized in 1767 in the thermal city of Bath by John Wood Jr. This model, which also inspired Bruno Taut's "Horseshoe Estate" and French post-modern architecture, starting from Boffille's "Echelles du Baroque" in Paris, brings together the idea of the serial repetition of the terraced house and that of the multi-storey building, and thus of the detached house, through a unitary and strongly self-defining urban design. If the British landscape is characterized by an ideal of settlement based on consolidated building types and urban models which can give it a certain uniformity or by models inspired by a kind of sublimation in the relationship between architecture, art and nature as in Robert Adam's Kenwood House in Hampstead (De Seta, 1986), traditionally the Italian landscape offers a different kind of variety in the scenographic relationship between the morphology of the natural places and the architectural "solution". The Roman countryside can still teach us an important lesson: the dislocation of small agricultural undertakings characterized by the idea of a central empty unit surrounded by housing, work and animal farming units brings us back to an ideal that resists the state of decay which, unfortunately, often characterizes them. Far from evoking the kind of fairy-tale bucolic atmosphere of the "Mulino Bianco" (literally "White Mill"), the new horizons evoked by strategies for sustainability seem to invoke again a theoretical reflection on man-made environment. Besides, the incapacity to plan on a large scale should lead to a policy of accurate re-activation of existing realities re-establishing a connection with that kind of reality. The new urban areas should then be based on planimetric layouts following the Roman typo/morphological structure paying special attention to one the most popular models starting from the Baroque period, that of the courtyard enclosed on three sides with the fourth one that gives out onto the natural landscape (figure 3, 4). This variation of the cloister model which can be realized in medium-scale for housing developments as well as for urban systems so linked to form complex urban fabrics has been studied and sometimes remarkably re-interpreted in our modern culture even though charged with symbolical meanings. This was done, for instance, by Louis Kahn, with the design of a cloister structure for the Dominican Sisters' Convent in Pennsylvania in 1965 or with the idea of a metaphysical square for the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in San Diego in 1959. In Finland, in the town hall of Saynatsalo in 1951 Alvar Alto built a little jewel, a kind of building with a village-like structure following the courtyard arrangement characterized by a stronger human dimension.

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## Conclusion

Apart from these examples, today the ideal of an urban-scale architecture whose forms well express a system of relationships with the surrounding environment and which at the same time is able to impose itself with its own scale, seems to be absolutely necessary. In order to get this idea more widely shared, starting from the very training pro-

grams and especially from Engineering and Architecture study programs, it is necessary to encourage the study of History, since without a knowledge of this any effort will remain fruitless.

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