

The More Things Change, The More They Stay The Same: An Examination of Piazza Navona



View of Piazza Navona, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, c. 1750

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Rome is known for its great public spaces. Sometimes it seems as if one cannot help but stumble upon a masterwork of urban design through the course of a day's wanderings, and each one is entirely unique. From the Capitoline Hill to Piazza del Popolo, from the Spanish Steps to St. Peter's Square, the city holds an infinite wealth of experiences and knowledge for the aspiring architect to absorb. One of the finest examples of the city's public spaces, with one of the city's more complex histories, is the Piazza Navona, in the Parione *rione* of the city. For 2000 years, despite a variety of names and borders, the heart of the piazza has remained unchanged, and it is this characteristic which makes it one of the most fascinating to study, and to learn the lessons of urban design from.

1. Origins

The Piazza Navona, uniquely among Rome's great public spaces, has kept the same form throughout its storied history. This form dates from 86 CE, when the emperor Domitian built a stadium to house his

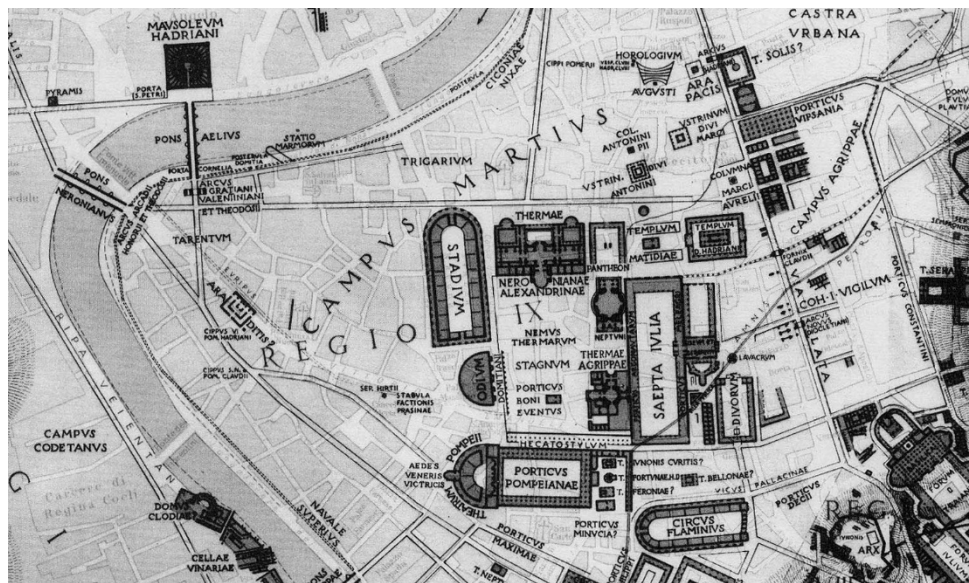


Figure 1: Detail of Lanciani's 1901 *Forma Urbis Romae*, showing Stadium of Domitian

quadrennial Capitoline Games, modelled after the Greek Panhellenic Games (of which the Olympics are today the most famous). The stadium was one of 4 archetypes of entertainment buildings in ancient Rome, the other three being the theater, amphitheater, and circus¹. Each type of building was built for a different type of

¹ John Humphrey, *Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Racing* (Somerset: Butler & Tanner Ltd., 1986), 2. ProQuest Ebrary

entertainment: theaters for dramatic productions, amphitheaters for gladiatorial combat, circuses for ridden and chariot horse races, and the stadium for athletic competitions.

The Stadium of Domitian was the last of these typologies to come to Rome in permanent form (following the Theater of Marcellus, Flavian Amphitheater, and Circus Maximus), situated on an empty area of the Campus Martius outside the city walls at the time near the baths of Nero (Figure 1). In building stadia, Roman engineers often took advantage of natural topography, using found slopes as seating tiers for the arena—however, the flat nature of the Campus Martius (and, likely, a desire for grandeur by Domitian) meant this stadium would be completely above ground level². Externally, the façade likely evoked the Flavian Amphitheater, with two stacked arcades of increasing order (Ionic, then Corinthian) leading through vomitoria to the seating inside.

This stadium would continue to serve its original purpose for decades, even gaining additional use as a gladiatorial arena when the Flavian Amphitheater was damaged by fire in 217 CE, but with the decline of the Roman Empire, so too was there a decline in the state of its infrastructure. By the late 3rd century, a variety of stores and brothels had taken shape within the arcades of the structure (one of these brothels played a significant role in the martyrdom of Saint Agnes, a story discussed later in this writing), and by a century after that, the stadium’s initial athletic program was completely abandoned, leaving Domitian’s arena little more than a quarry³.

2. Transition

For the next thousand years, little of note occurred in these ruins, other than a change of name—the former Stadium had become the Circus Agonalis, or Agone (Circus, after a mistaken belief that the ruins had been a circus in its past life; Agonalis,

² Wall text, *Piazza Navona Underground*, Stadio di Domiziano, Rome.

³ Wall text, *Piazza Navona Underground*, Stadio di Domiziano, Rome.

after *agone*, the Latin for gymnastic contests or their celebration), a name which would in future years go through multiple iterations to be further transmuted into the present Piazza Navona⁴.

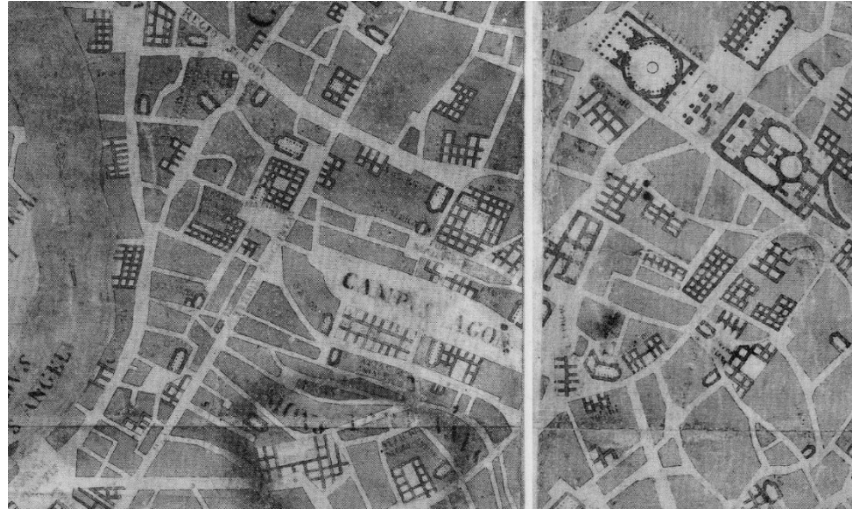


Figure 2: Detail of Bufalini's 1551 Map of Rome, labeling the piazza as Campus Agone

However, other than these semantic

evolutions of the space, the Circus Agonalis endured, changing minimally throughout the Middle Ages, with the structure of the stadium remaining visible well into the 1400s. This would change in the 1470s, however, with two events that would completely change the future of the Circus, jump-starting its transformation into the Piazza Navona we know today. In immediate effects, Pope Sixtus IV's 1477 decision to move the city markets from Piazza d'Aracoeli to Navona was more significant, as it resulted in a rapid building boom in the piazza that would completely cover the ruins of the stadium until their excavation in modern times⁵. But in long-term effects, the much more significant event occurred seven years earlier, when one Antonio Pamphilj bought a house on the southwest corner of the Piazza⁶.

⁴ Samuel Ball Plattner. *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (Oxford: rev. Thomas Ashby., 1929), 495, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Places/Europe/Italy/Lazio/Roma/Rome/_Texts/PLATOP*/Stadium_Domitiani.html.

⁵ George H. Sullivan, *Not Built in a Day* (New York: Avalon Publishing Group, 2006), 85

⁶ Stephanie C. Leone, "Cardinal Pamphilj Builds a Palace," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 63, no. 4 (Dec. 2004): 442.

3. Activation

The Pamphilj family, nobility in their home of Gubbio, quickly maneuvered themselves into power in Rome, placing two members in the College of Cardinals, one of whom, Giovanni Battista Pamphilj, became Pope



Figure 3: Detail of Maggi's 1625 Map of Rome, showing Piazza Navona directly before Innocent X's interventions

Innocent X in 1644. At this point, the family had bought much of the block to live in, and now, with the full authority (and coffers) of the Church behind them, they could build a family presence on the Piazza in accordance with their newfound apotheosis to the highest echelon of Roman society⁷.

To begin, the Pamphilj started with their family house, now to become the Palazzo Pamphilj, designed mainly by Girolamo and Carlo Rainaldi, beginning in 1644. Upon completion of this suitably prestigious fronting on the piazza, Innocent X turned his attention to the piazza itself, which was currently being beautified by predecessors of its present lesser fountains (the basins of the Fountain of the Moor and the Fountain of Neptune had been placed by Giacomo della Porta in 1575 and 1574, respectively—the former had some statuary, but the eponymous Moor would be added by Bernini later, and the Fountain of Neptune would be missing its Neptune until 1878) but marred by a large water trough for horses at the center⁸. As the papal family desired a slightly more distinguished view from their windows, and they now had the resources and power to do

⁷ Stephanie C. Leone, "Cardinal Pamphilj Builds a Palace," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 63, no. 4 (Dec. 2004): 446.

⁸ Jake Morrissey, *The Genius in the Design* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 202.

something about it, the scene was set for the centerpiece of Piazza Navona to come into being: the Fountain of the Four Rivers.

The story of the competition for this monument is one of the more famous of Baroque Rome. The general concept, a fountain incorporating a recently discovered obelisk from the circus of Maxentius and celebrating the four great rivers of the world, is Francesco Borromini's,



Figure 4: Detail of Caspar Van Wittel's 1699 Piazza Navona, showing Sant'Agnesse and the Fountain of the Four Rivers

but the design is Gianlorenzo Bernini's, despite his not being invited to the design competition (Bernini being out of favor at the time due to Innocent X's predisposition against anyone associated with his predecessor Urban VIII, as well as a scandal involving the stability—or lack thereof—of the bell towers of St. Peter's Basilica). This feat of persuasion was accomplished with inside help, as the pope's nephew Niccolò Ludovisi (alternatively, some accounts give credit to the pope's sister-in-law, Olimpia) smuggled a model of Bernini's design into Palazzo Pamphilj, where Innocent X saw it and was compelled to give the commission to Bernini, "for he who desires not to use Bernini's designs must take care not to see them"⁹. And so, in 1648, construction began on the Fountain of the Four Rivers, which was completed three years later and has stood as the piazza's main attraction ever since.

⁹ Robert Hughes, *Rome* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2011), 293.

The Fountain of the Four Rivers consists of a Roman obelisk, commemorating Domitian, on a four-legged base with a void beneath. This structure, while unorthodox at the time (to the point where onlookers gathered during construction to watch its seemingly inevitable collapse), was in fact highly stable, a fact



Figure 5: Detail of the Fountain of the Four Rivers, showing the manifestation of the Rio de la Plata

proven by its larger and later cousin in Paris, designed by a man by the name of Eiffel¹⁰. The four legs commemorate the four great rivers of the world (in counterclockwise order, from southwest, the Danube, Ganges, Nile, and Plata) as baroque interpretations of the Roman river god statue with his various attributes, while also representing the four known continents (Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, respectively), or in simpler terms, the four corners of the world. As a viewer makes this cycle around the fountain, the rivers appear to become more and more agitated, culminating in the Plata's panicked arm raised for protection against the ever-present danger of the apparently imminent collapse of the obelisk¹¹. This suitably baroque narrative keeps the viewer constantly engaged as they cycle around the fountain, a sculpture-in-the-round (rare for Bernini) which creates an infinitude of experiences well-suited to its location at the heart of the piazza. Additionally, above this microcosm of the four corners of the world, the Pamphilj dove stands atop the obelisk, symbol both of the family's dominion

¹⁰ Robert Hughes, *Rome* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2011), 292

¹¹ Frank Fehrenbach. "Impossibile: Bernini in Piazza Navona." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* no.63/64 (Spring/Autumn 2013): 233.

of the piazza, and, in its alternate interpretation as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, the Church's dominion of the world.

The other unifying element of the Piazza Navona today, built to complement the other Pamphili interventions on the Piazza and give a suitable counterpoint to Bernini's masterpiece, is the church of Sant'Agnese in Agone, built over roughly twenty years



Figure 6: Oblique View of Sant'Agnes in Agone from the south end of the Piazza

beginning in 1652. The list of associated architects is almost as long as that of St. Peter's Basilica, including Girolamo Rainaldi (1652-3), Francesco Borromini (1653-5), Carlo Rainaldi (1657-66), Gianlorenzo Bernini (1666-8), and either Carlo Rainaldi again or Pietro da Cortona (1668-72) finishing it out.

The church replaced an earlier one in the piazza, also dedicated to Saint Agnes. Born c.291 CE, Agnes declared herself married to Christ around the age of thirteen, an announcement which led to her consignment to a brothel in the arcades of the Stadium of Domitian before her eventual martyrdom by beheading c.304 CE¹². However, the earlier church was oriented away from the Piazza, facing an exterior side street, and as such a reorientation was called for by Innocent X, who additionally saw an opportunity to build a family chapel worthy of the papal family. So, construction began, and despite being built by a series of architects whose first steps were often to partially undo the work of their predecessors, the church was completed in spectacular fashion in 1672. The exterior façade, mainly by Borromini, curves inward—it is the only building on the block to step back from the piazza, which serves to both emphasize its importance and

¹² George H. Sullivan, *Not Built in a Day* (New York: Avalon Publishing Group, 2006), 90.

not block any views of the adjacent Palazzo Pamphilj, as the extending stair of the Rainaldis' first attempt did. Inside, the church is a Greek cross plan, which takes maximum advantage of the narrow site by placing the main space (and the dome above it) almost directly on the piazza, emphasizing the oblique views and making it visible from all vantage points in the piazza while creating a visual counterpoint to the central obelisk, further highlighted with the addition of the towers by the Rainaldis after Borromini's dismissal¹³. Other than the aforementioned addition of statuary to the Fountain of Neptune, and renovations to other buildings in the Piazza to reflect the new importance of the space, this would be the last major change in Piazza Navona until modern times, marking the end of what was certainly the most important period of evolution of the Piazza since the Rome of Domitian.

4. Situation

In terms of the nature of the Piazza, there has been little to no change after the Pamphilj period. The market moved away to the Campo dei Fiori in 1869, cars have come and gone since then, but the only significant changes to the fabric of the Piazza itself occurred under Mussolini, when a plan to connect the 1888 Palazzo di



Figure 7: Piazza Navona today, as seen from Google Maps

Giustizia to Corso Vittorio Emanuele II via the Via Zanardelli (the large north-south corridor at the top left of Figure 7) went awry with the discovery of the Stadium of Domitian beneath the buildings forming the northern edge of the Piazza, which were

¹³ Jake Morrissey, *The Genius in the Design* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 218.

demolished in the excavation and rebuilt to leave the stadium exposed¹⁴. To avoid cutting through the ancient remains, as well as the piazza itself, traffic was instead diverted through the Corso del Rinascimento one street to the east of the piazza, which cut through the urban fabric (and many of the buildings on it, prompting their current 20th century facades) to connect the 19th century Palazzo di Giustizia to the 16th century church of Sant'Andrea della Valle, leaving the Piazza Navona and urban context we see today.

5. The Piazza Today

What is today's experience of Piazza Navona? Beginning with approach, there are seven entrances to the Piazza, which can be divided into two types: perpendicular and tangential. Both have their benefits—entering perpendicular to the space allows it to gradually open up in front of the visitor; entering tangentially, the visitor has no idea of the space's existence until it is already upon them. It is up to the visitor which they prefer, but the author believes the tangential entrance is more in line with the overarching concept of the space, which is, quite simply, *contrast*. Contrast between the narrow approach and the expansive vista of the arrival; between the long north-south promenade through the space and the much shorter east-west crossing; between the vertical eruptions of the fountains and church, and the otherwise uniform horizontality of the rest of the piazza. All this contrast, whether intentional or not, is towards a purpose, and that purpose is to emphasize the paradoxical cohesiveness of the piazza.

By all rights, a space with such a disjointed history should not be as successful as it is. And yet, after 2000 years of construction and destruction, Piazza Navona has remained one of the most successful public spaces in the world. And perhaps, rather than doing so in spite of its history, it has become so successful because of it. Going back to time immemorial, Navona has been a place for Romans to relax in the heart of the city, a place for children to come with their parents, and their parents' parents, and so on down the line, creating a collective memory of this space as public space. Maybe there is no one alive who remembers the naval battles in the summer heat of the 19th

¹⁴ Wall text, *Piazza Navona Underground*, Stadio di Domiziano, Rome.

century, or the fruits and flowers of the 16th century markets, or the striving athletics of the 1st century, but there is a cultural memory nevertheless, calling people to the piazza.

Can anything like this be created today? An aspiring architect or urban planner can certainly try to learn the lessons of Rome, the physiology and psychology of their urban design, but 2000 years of history cannot be designed into a project. However, this may not necessarily be a bad thing. The public spaces being built today are being designed for their own zeitgeist, and as often as not, they are successful in that short term. Whether any of these spaces will evolve as Piazza Navona has, and continue to exist in 2000 years, no one can say. Whether Navona, even, will do the same, no one can say either. But; for the present, this is irrelevant. As far as the everyday visitor is concerned, Piazza Navona has always been there, and always will be.



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