Rome: A Brief Analysis

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There is a city in the heart of Europe that has accrued many names over its millennia of existence. The Capital of the World; the Sacred City; the City of the Seven Hills; the Eternal City—Rome. It is a city the writings, drawings, and experiences of which border on the infinite, for much like the Venice of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, it is a different city to everyone who passes through—and quite a few people have passed through its gates. This writing will attempt to detail an analysis of the urban condition of Rome, and while it must of necessity be a brief and shallow overview, it is the hope that it will nevertheless prove insightful, if nothing else as one impression of one of the most complex urban conditions on Earth.

To begin, a definition of scope: while the metropolitan area of the city extends for hundreds of square miles into the surrounding suburbs, the actual urban center (and main focus of this writing) comprises a much smaller area largely defined by the Aurelian Wall, a 3rd century construction that has since come to serve as the de facto definition of what is Rome and what is not. Interestingly, while the border wall is usually conceived of as a protective construction, keeping enemies out and the population safe, the Aurelian Wall has rarely had to act as such; there have certainly been sieges and invaders—indeed the country of Italy as known today came into existence with the breach of the walls in 1870—but on the whole the wall has mainly served as spatial divider; freely traversable yet subconsciously present at all times (Coates-Stephens 1998). With this wall defining the limits of the city's horizontal extents, Rome was forced to find a different avenue of evolution, and so the city began to build on top of itself, a procedure that would result in the city's nature as a cultural/architectural/artistic/urban palimpsest like no other.

In reading this palimpsest, or attempting to unpack it, it would be well to start from the beginning. Leaving tales of she-wolves and fratricide for the historians to unravel, the earliest traces of urban Rome still extant—those of Republican and Imperial times— consist of two competing typologies—that of the planned and unplanned. Planned early Rome most visibly manifests in the Corso, the north-south axis of the city that runs from the Porta del Popolo (the traditional entrance to the city) down to the geographic and metaphoric center of the city, the Capitoline Hill, former site of Rome's premier temple to Jupiter and current home to the municipal government and city museum (Connors 1982). The context in which other remnants of republican and imperial Rome were oriented have been lost to history, leaving the Pantheon et al as isolated islands of history, sporadically jutting out of a far younger urban ocean. The Corso, however, by dint of its scale and nature as context *provider*, remains recognizable and iconic, and it (in conjunction with the east-west *decumanus*, a secondary urban axis only visible in current Rome in the 19th century Corso Vittorio Emmanuelle II) served as a template for subsequent Roman settlements throughout Europe (e.g. Florence, Barcelona, Petra, and others). Southwest and adjoining the Capitoline Hill are the remnants of unplanned Republican and Imperial Rome: the Forum. This complex of temples, government buildings, meeting areas, and shops was the heart of the city, and over the centuries of the empire it grew, expanding organically from the original Roman Forum as subsequent emperors (Julius and Augustus Caesar, Vespasian, Nerva, and Trajan, in order) made their own marks in the (increasingly limited) space, resulting in an incredibly complex urban space that managed to form a gestalt of individual interventions that was constantly evolving and adapting to the changes happening in the city and, through the lens of the Empire, the world at large (Canniffe 2008) (Hughes 2011)**.** Today, little remains but dust and ruins, but what is left stands as testament to the city's illustrious past.

The next layer of urban Rome is a complex one, for while Medieval Rome comprises much of the underlying fabric of contemporary Rome, it is also a reminder of the city's darkest period. In the centuries after Constantine moved the seat of the Empire to the east in 330 CE, Rome fell upon dark times, with a number of invasions eventually culminating in the abdication of the last western emperor, Romulus Augustus, in 476 CE at the prompting of the Goths. With the empire defunct, the taxes and shipments that sustained the city dried up, and food and supply shortages prompted a massive loss of population as people fled for greener pastures (Hughes 2011). With the city being abandoned, the infrastructure that serviced it began to collapse for want of maintenance, and as the aqueducts that hydrated the outer edges of the city failed one by one, what population remained (down to 25 000 from 1 million at its peak) resettled to be close to the only remaining reliable source of water: the Tiber River. This region of the city was known as the Campus Martius; in Imperial times it was the site of a number of large public buildings; now with the public forced to become squatters in their own history, these buildings and the spaces between them became home to a new form of urbanism—one in the tradition of the unplanned Fora, but rather than being shoehorned into the city on a grand scale, the Campus Martius grew on a vernacular level; a collection of small, anonymous moves that over time resulted in the complex fabric which baffles pilgrims and tourists to this day. That said, while it may seem inscrutable at first or tenth glance, there is an underlying logic to the medieval city; rather than the gridiron that is common in artificially planned cities, medieval Rome's structure is arterial in nature, with streets beginning at important nodes (usually churches, but sometimes the palazzi of the obscenely wealthy and influential families of the city) and branching off further and further until they meet other systems, at which point the idiosyncratic nature of these watershed meetings is likely what causes most of the confusion (Connors 1982).

With the city built out to the extent its (still relatively meager) population could support, there were two options for the next generation of interventions: deconstruction or reconstruction. Given the surplus of wealth and new cultural ideals that defined the Renaissance, and the oligarchical power structure that allowed for quick and decisive moves by those in charge, Rome saw a number of dramatic changes in this period. The reconstructive moves occurred most notably in the Vatican, especially with the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica, to an extent that books are not long enough to cover in suitable depth. It is the deconstructive moves, though, that have had greater impact on the city at large; namely, the great avenues of Sixtus V that truly shaped the city into the form we know it today. Elected pope in 1585, Sixtus was concerned with the shape and circulation of the city to the point of obsession. Having inherited a medieval hodgepodge of winding back-alleys, he saw an opportunity to reorient and reorganize the city by having his architect, Domenico Fontana, cut straight swaths through it (important note: this involved invoking eminent domain over, and subsequently razing, anything in the way), connecting the major pilgrimage churches and anchoring the nodes of this new system with obelisks theretofore left broken where they had fallen after the collapse of the empire (Hughes 2011). This new structural framework was meant to make the pilgrimage that brought most people to Rome at the time a much easier endeavor, drawing more people to undertake it and thereby revitalizing the city.

However, while these new avenues were excised from the city on an inconceivably fast timeline (done largely within the 5 years of Sixtus' papacy), this speed came at a price: a good deal of monetary and political capital had been spent in the process, and it would take time for enough reserves to be built back up to fund the resurfacing of these new elements of the urban fabric, by which points tastes had changed, and a new style had come to the fore: partly in response to the Protestant Reformation's worrisome spread, partly in response to exhaustion of the Renaissance's

stoic, staid perfectionism, the Catholic Church (having firmly centralized power within the city) needed something new and exciting to appease its subjects, and that something was the Baroque. If the 16th century Renaissance is responsible for the structure of the city of Rome, the 17th century Baroque is responsible for its façade; nearly every public piazza in the city has an element of the Baroque in it, from focal points added to existing spaces (Piazza Navona and its Fountain of the Four Rivers/Church of Sant'Agnese, Piazza Barberini and the Triton Fountain), to spaces entirely conceived and built in the period (Saint Peter's Square), most of which were built by the hands of Baroque Rome's dueling masters, Gianlorenzo Bernini and Francesco Borromini (Morrissey 2006). Much could be written about these two and their outsized contributions to Rome, but this writing will content itself to say that without them, the city would not be what it is today.

By this point, the old city had, for the most part, attained a form that would be relatively recognizable today. Some of the city's landmarks had yet to be built, but for the most part, the urban fabric was saturated. This left one direction for the city to grow in the Neoclassical era, one heretofore untouched since ancient times: pure horizontal spread. With the national reunification of Italy in 1870, Rome suddenly gained a good deal more territory to supervise, and with it came an influx of people that would need places to live and work. With the outer edges of the enclosed city having been abandoned to farmland (as can be seen in Giambattista Nolli's famous 1748 Pianta Grande di Roma), the space was there for the taking, and a modern, organized gridiron (albeit one punctuated by the churches and ruins scattered through the landscape) quickly formed (Hughes 2011).

History occurs in cycles, and with the city having reached a population and construction plateau reminiscent of that of the late medieval period, the next and, at this point, final layer of Rome's urban condition took place in a manner evoking the Renaissance: deconstruction and reconstruction. With control of the city unilaterally belonging to the Fascists, Mussolini was able to reshape Rome however he saw fit, which, with no room to build anew, meant making room. Thus, the great modern avenues were cut into the city at the expense of large (and often historic) neighborhoods that had the misfortune to be in the way, with the Via della Conciliazione razing the Borgo district and the Via dei Forii Imperiale plowing through the center of the eponymous Fora. Only Piazza Navona was spared by the Corso del Rinascimento, due to the ruins of the Stadium of Domitian that gives the piazza its shape, found in the excavation process (Hughes 2011). With these interventions, and the resurfacing required to cover the new facades now fronting the new avenues, Rome within the Aurelian Wall gained the shape we see today, with only one building, Richard Meyer's Museo dell'Ara Pacis, having been added since.

With this unparalleled complexity of an urban condition, with all these layers of construction and deconstruction and reconstruction, these millennia of Frankensteinian interventions on the corpse of an archaic imperial capital city, one might ask: can Rome still be called the same city, or is it merely a resettlement amidst the bones of what is dead and gone? The only thing keeping the latter case from being true is, quite simply, that there is no corpse—the city is alive, and always has been. It pulses, ebbs and flows, growing and shrinking with the times, but the heart is always the same: the people. Whatever happens, whoever is cutting into the city or building it bigger than ever before, there will always be children playing amidst the ruins, tourists come to see the monuments, and longtime residents going about their days as usual. Through the people, as much as the urban condition, the unbroken line of Rome's history can be drawn back to its primordial condition, and as far into the future as can yet be determined.

Figure 1: Aurelian Wall, still extant today

Figure 2: Via del Corso, running straight, relatively north

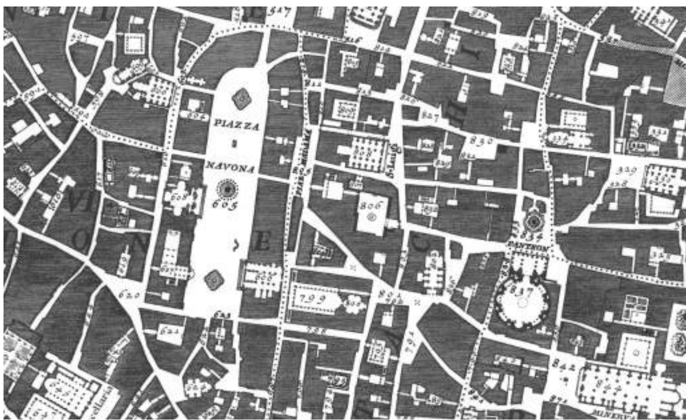

Figure 3: Portion of Campus Martius, Pianta Grande di Roma

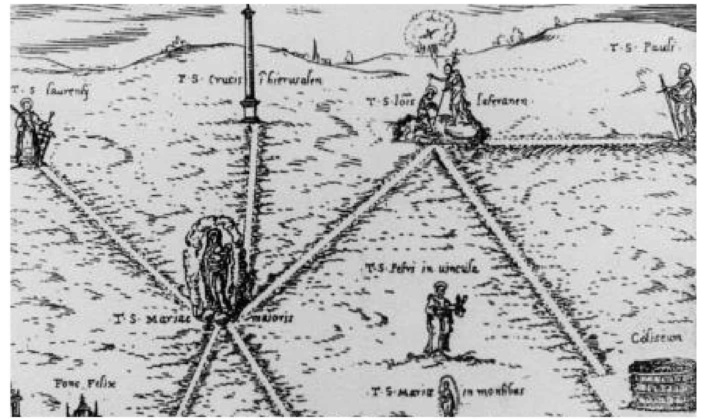

Figure 4: Drawing of Sixtus V's constructed avenues (Colosseum at bottom right)

Figure 5: Piazza Navona, with Church of Sant'Agnese in Agone (dome center left) and Fountain of the Four Rivers (obelisk center right)

Figure 6: Via XX Settembre, showing neoclassical construction

Figure 7: Via dei Forii Imperiale, connecting Piazza Venezia and Colosseum

Figure 8: Museo dell'Ara Pacis, completed 2006

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