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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4dp1b8bn>

Journal

Places, 5(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

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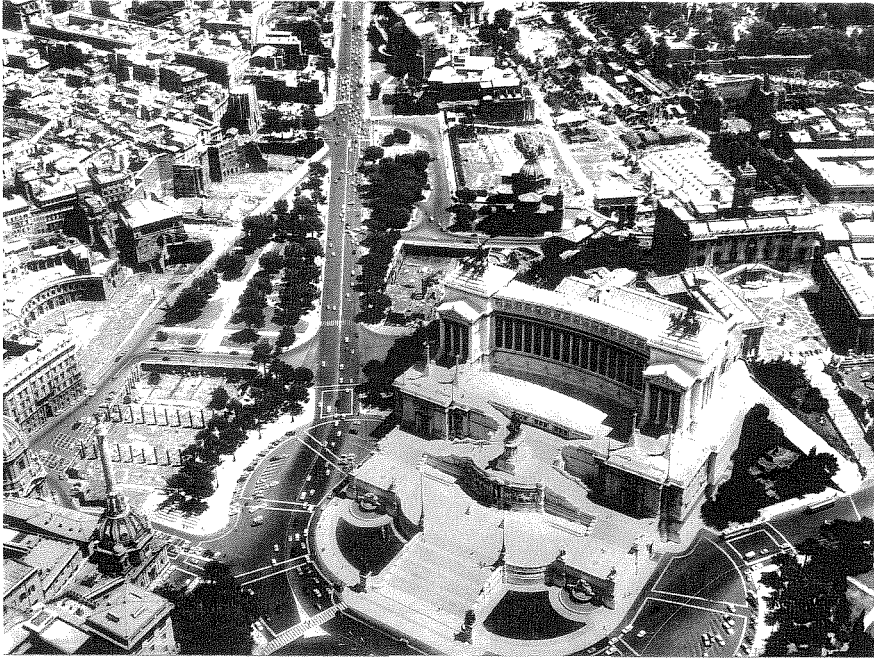
Publication Date

1988-04-01

Peer reviewed

Excavations in the Roman Status Quo

Roberto Einaudi



I Aerial view of Via dei Fori Imperiali, showing the Monument of Vittorio Emanuele and Piazza Venezia (*foreground*), the forums of Trajan, Augustus, and Nerva (*left*), and the Roman Forum (*right*).

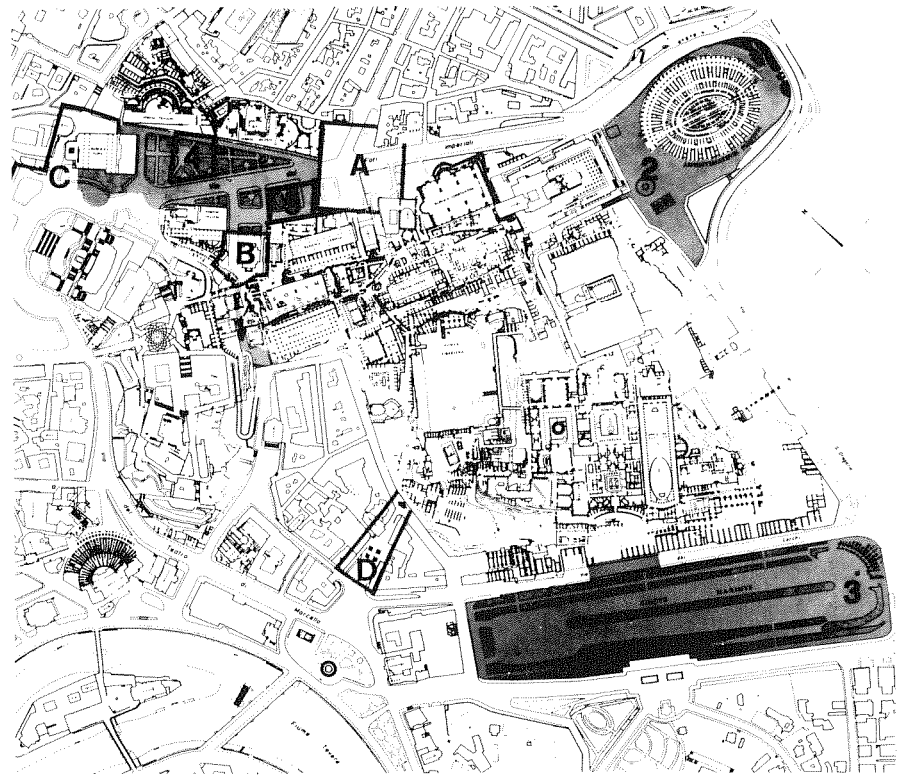
Photograph by Fotocielo.

After the December 1978 earthquake, Archaeological Superintendent of Rome Adriano La Regina raised a cry of alarm against the progressive destruction of the Roman monuments and the loss of the marble decoration left exposed to the elements. The vibrations caused by the endless traffic and the pollution resulting from the exhausts of cars and heating plants were combining with the natural elements to destroy our architectural and artistic heritage. The state superintendency succeeded in obtaining the support of the city government and a wide sector of the public, an action leading to the closure in 1981 of Via della Consolazione between the Roman Forum and the Capitoline Hill and to the passage of a special law in parliament to allow extraordinary research and restoration in the archaeological area. A joint city–state committee in 1983 proposed the gradual closure of the main thoroughfare, Via dei Fori Imperiali (which divided the area of the forums), and the start of systematic archaeological research on and excavation of the area.

The project to transform the area of the forums, although born from archaeological conservation needs, clearly posed even greater problems at urban, architectural, historic, and social levels. Plans for phased excavations allowed maximum public use of the area during the dig. Excavations were to start in 1983 in Trajan's Forum in the gardens of Via Alessandrina and in 1984 in the Forum of Nerva. During the next 15 years,

explorations were to be extended to the entire area of the imperial forums, linking them with the Roman Forum by eliminating Via dei Fori Imperiali between Piazza Venezia and Largo Corrado Ricci above the ancient Forum of Peace. The creation of raised pedestrian pathways—reconstructions of several of the Renaissance streets that criss-crossed the area before it was demolished in the 1930s—would allow the public to penetrate and cross the area and to follow the digs without interfering with them. At the same time, an international competition was to be held to define the configuration of the three piazzas that formed important nodes between the city and the archaeological area: Piazza Venezia—Piazza Colonna Traiana, Piazza S. S. Luca e Martina, and Largo Corrado Ricci.

Great anticipation was felt around the world as the time for the initiation of the project approached. But, slowly opposition was mounting. The national Ministry of Culture, after a change of ministers, reversed its previous stance and made it clear that no funds provided by the special law were to be used for any new excavations. However, the left-wing city government allocated money to start the excavations, even without funding from the central government, and a large area over the Forum of Nerva adjacent to the entry of the Roman Forum was fenced in. But the elections of 1985 brought a change in the city government, which continues to pay lip service to the project but appears to have shelved it.



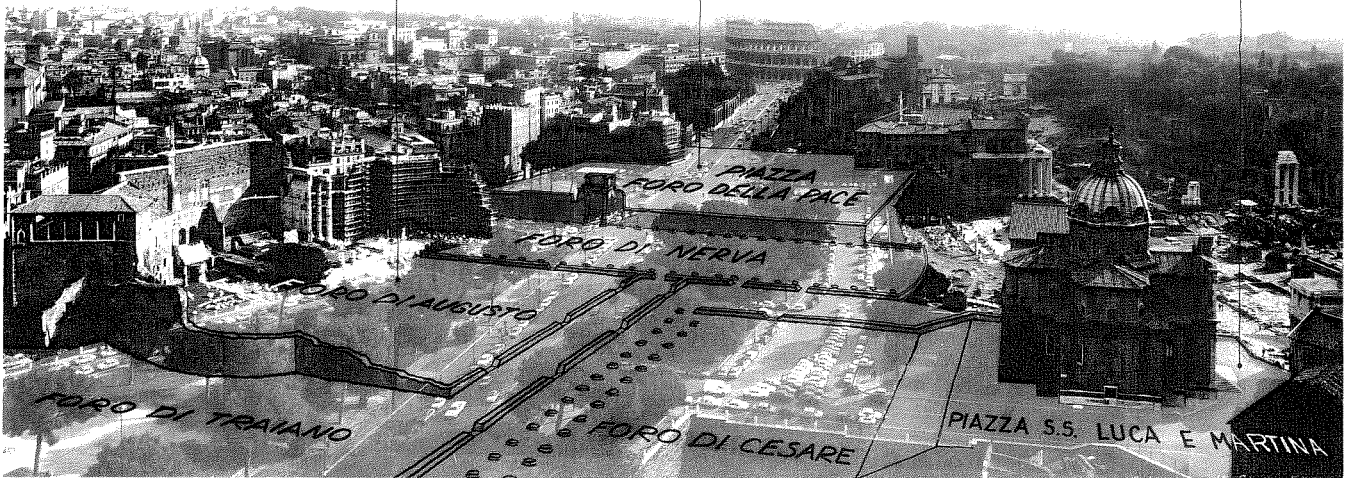
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2 Archaeological plan of 1983, indicating the areas to be excavated (*shaded*) and the urban piazzas to be restudied to provide access to the archaeological park (A–D). Drawing by Studio Einaudi

*Fori Imperiali: recupero della
unità dell'area dei Fori Imperiali
e del Foro Romano per creare
un unico grande parco
archeologico urbano.*

*Piazza Foro della Pace:
terrazza sui Fori. La sistemazione
finale delle piazze di collegamento
ai Fori sarà oggetto di concorso
di idee.*

*Piazza S.S. Luca e Martina:
elemento di connessione tra
il Campidoglio ed i Fori.*

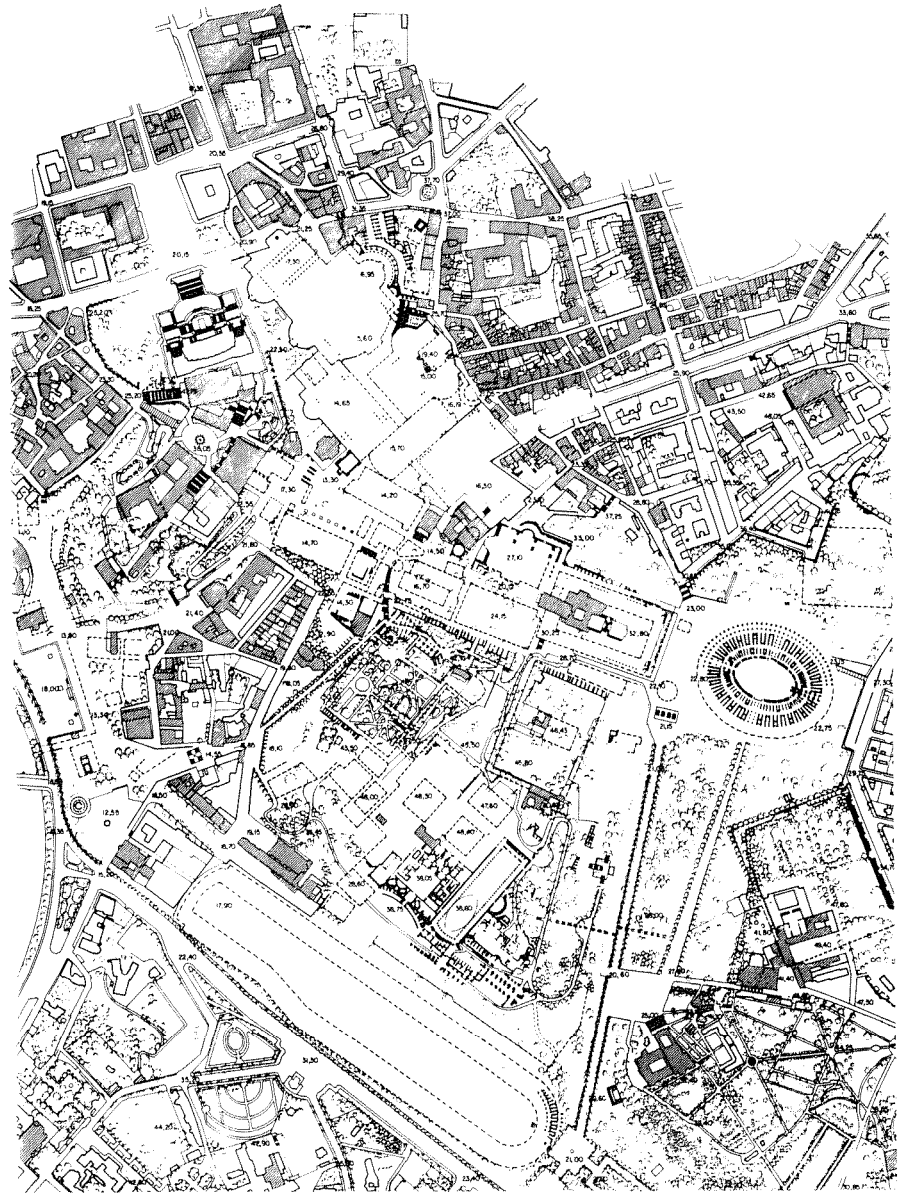


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3 Panoramic view of the present-day Via dei Fori Imperiali, and a superimposed diagram of the excavated forums proposed in the 1983 plan.

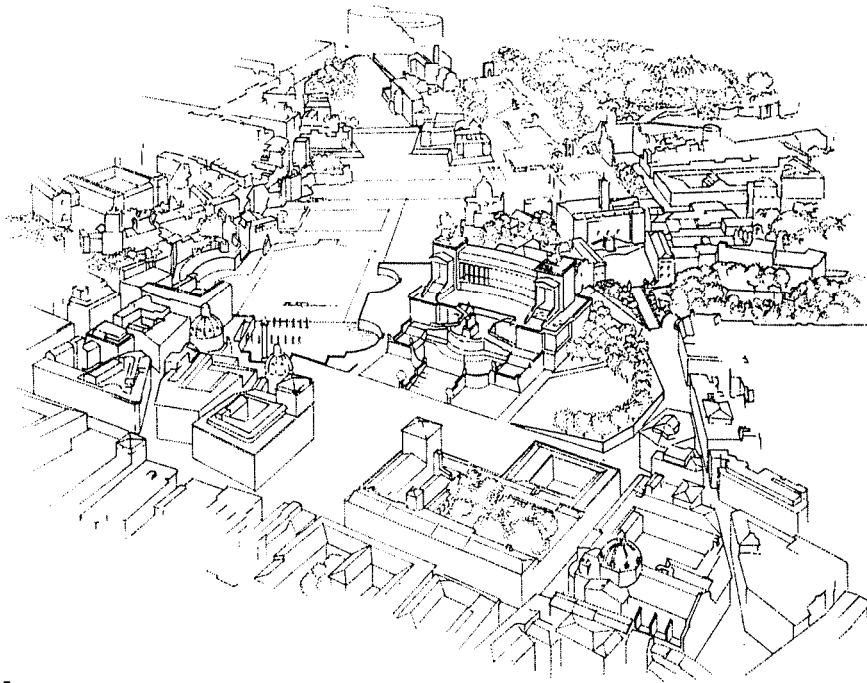
Photograph from Studio Einaudi

The opponents of the project say it is insane to remove a major traffic artery such as Via dei Fori Imperiali without first resolving the traffic problems of the city. The proponents answer that the majority of the cars using the street is through traffic that should be diverted to tangential roads around the city center and that the road only brings congestion in an area where it is essential that traffic be regulated. The opponents say the project costs too much and that there are many other more important things to do in Rome, that the Medieval Renaissance, and baroque art and architecture is also in severe decay and that the limited funds available would best be spent there. The proponents answer that the remains of the capital of the ancient world are unique and must be saved, as must all the unique artifacts of other eras. The cost of the project, they say, is the equivalent of the cost of building a few meters of subway, which no one would think of denying. The opponents say the proposed plan would open a large gaping hole—a cemetery—in the heart of a modern city. The proponents answer that large areas of the archaeological zone would be opened up as public piazzas, as places of assembly like those the forums were built to be. Pedestrian movement through the area would be stimulated rather than cut off by traffic and physical barriers as it is today. The opponents say that Via dei Fori Imperiali is as much a part of history as are the imperial forums below and those who wish to remove it are primarily interested in eliminating the traces of the fascist



4 Plan of the central archaeological area proposed by the state superintendency in 1986.

Drawing from "Roma, Studio per la Sistemazione dell'Area Archaeological Centrale," coordinated by Leonardo Benevolo



5

regime. The proponents say that surely a layer of asphalt cannot be compared with the multiple layers of history to be uncovered, layers that are not limited to the imperial Roman level, and that all historical eras including the fascist one will be thoroughly documented and, where appropriate, left in place. Although the debate has produced a stalemate at the present time, the differing points of view have led to a widening of the overall perspective, introducing many new ideas to the discussion.

In the meantime, even though no new excavation could be started outside the defined archaeological area, intensive research and digs were started within the area. The state superintendency, with the help of the Italian universities such as those of Rome and Pisa, the superintendency of the city of Rome, and foreign institutions, such as the American Academy in Rome, the Finnish Institute, the Swiss Academy, the French School, and the Scandinavian Institutes, explored an area that had previously been excavated only superficially. This work led to the discovery and definition of many strata, some extending as far back as the tenth century B.C.

The state superintendency has sponsored a new plan of the archaeological area. Leonardo Benevolo has coordinated this work, which includes input from urban planners, architects, archaeologists, traffic specialists, and landscape architects. Their proposal covers the entire central archaeological area, from Piazza

5 Perspective sketch of the area of the Roman forums after the execution of the proposed 1986 plan.

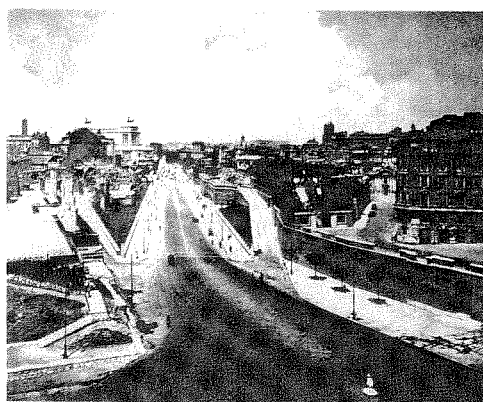
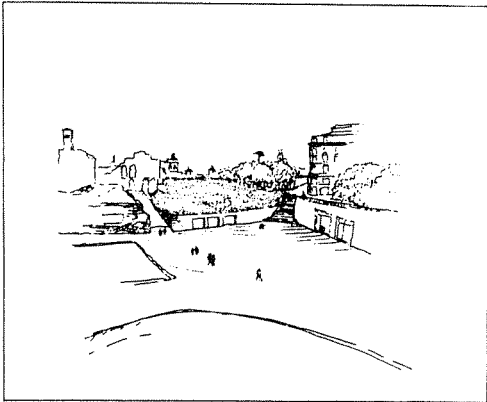
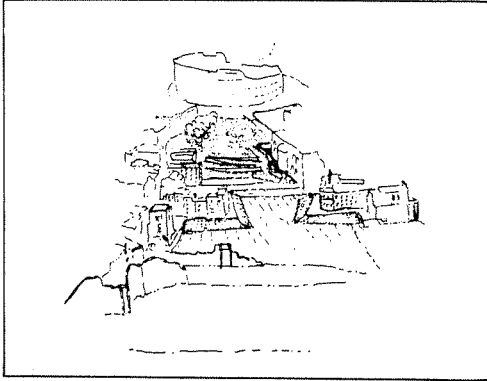
Drawing from "Roma, Studio per la Sistemazione dell'Area Archaeological Centrale," coordinated by Leonardo Benevolo

6 Two perspective sketches of the proposed museum, which would block the axis of Via dei Fori Imperiali, and photographs of the existing situation.

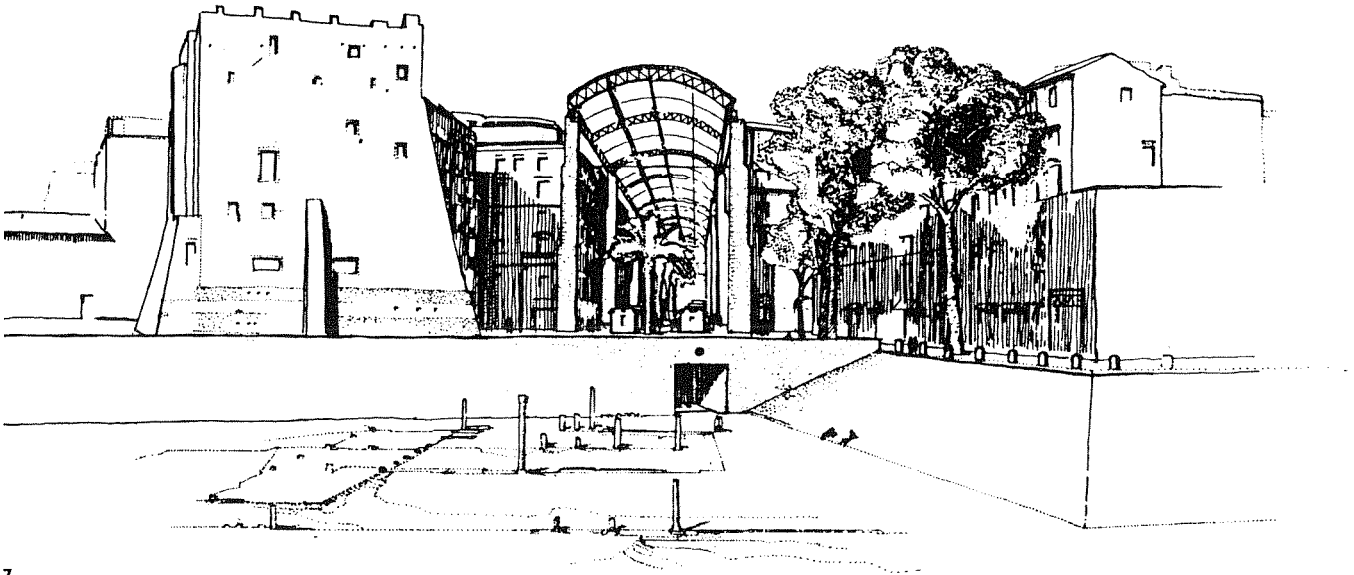
Drawings and photographs from "Roma, Studio per la Sistemazione dell'Area Archaeological Centrale," coordinated by Leonardo Benevolo

7 Perspective view of the termination of Via Cavour at the excavated Forum of Peace.

Drawing from "Roma, Studio per la Sistemazione dell'Area Archaeological Centrale," coordinated by Leonardo Benevolo



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8 The Colosseum, showing in the foreground the Velia Hill before its destruction to form Via dei Fori Imperiali.

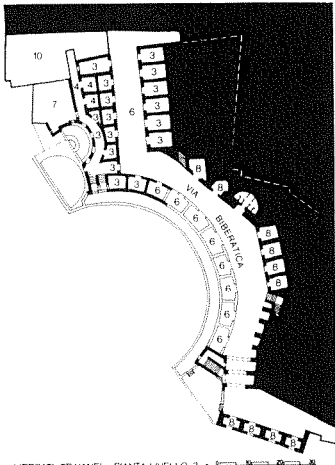
Photograph from Fototeca Unione

9 Plans for two of the six levels of Trajan's Markets.

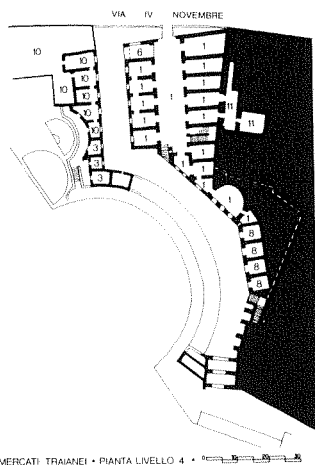
Drawings from Studio Einaudi

10 View of the semicircle of Trajan's Markets before its excavation.

Photograph by Esther Van Deman

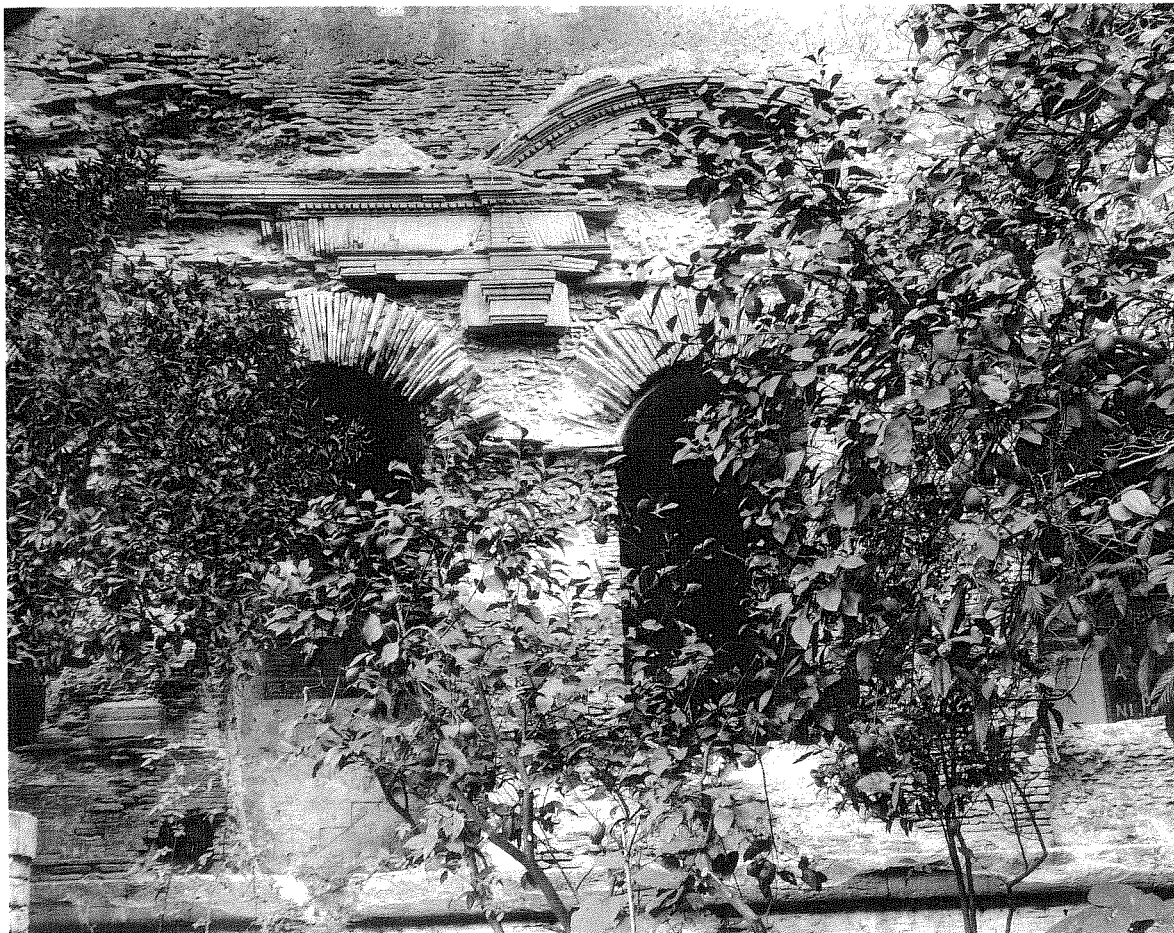


MERCATI TRAIANEI • PIANTA LIVELLO 3 •

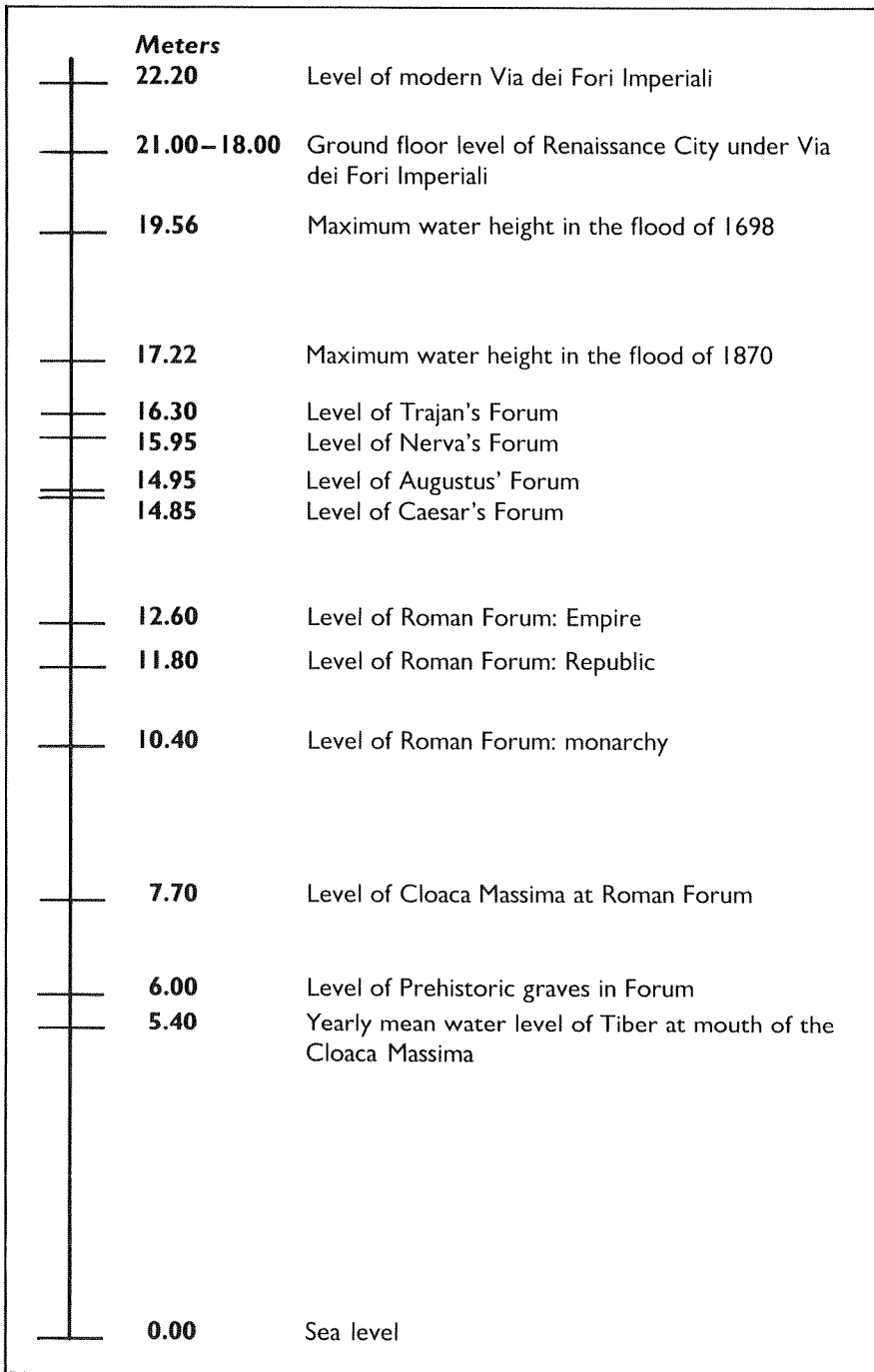


MERCATI TRAIANEI • PIANTA LIVELLO 4 •

9



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Venezia to the Appia Antica. One of the virtues of this plan is that it does not limit its analysis to the archaeological area but looks to the entire city to resolve the traffic problems of the historic center. For the area of the Roman forums, the new plan proposes a solution even more radical than the initial plan; all traffic would be eliminated from the entire length of Via dei Fori Imperiali and underground tunnels would be introduced in the area of the Colosseum and the Bath of Caracalla to eliminate surface traffic in the archaeological area within the Aurelian walls. To avoid a criticism of insufficient planning for traffic, the project includes proposals for new subways, the transformation of existing railway lines in support of a city rapid transit system, and the addition of new tangential highways to bypass the historic center. The new plan recommends that even the Foro della Pace (Largo Corrado Ricci) be excavated and that the Velia Hill, which divided the Colosseum from the forums before Mussolini cut through it to link Palazzo Venezia with the Colosseum, be totally reconstructed. The new Velia Hill would enclose within its volume a museum dedicated to the central archaeological area.

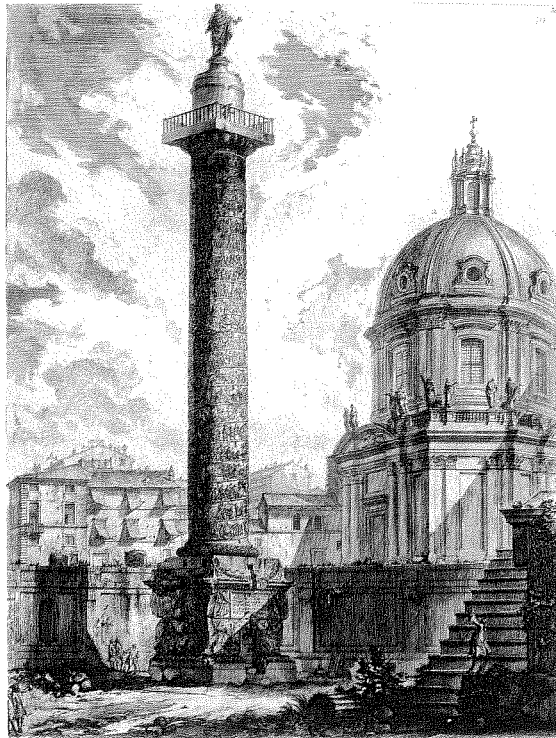
The virtues of this scheme are threefold: It completely eliminates traffic from the archaeological area; it provides a much-needed archaeological museum in direct contact with the area it serves; and it reconstitutes the original ancient Roman topography.



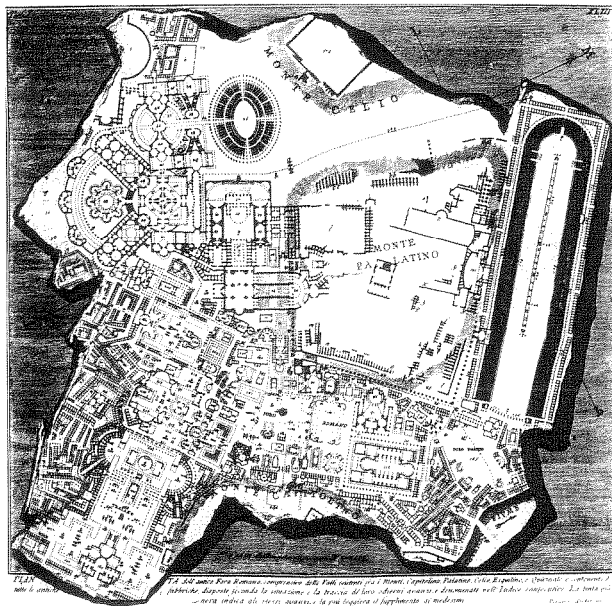
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11 Heights of the layers at the Roman Forum site. The numbers represent meters above sea level.
Diagram prepared by Studio Einaudi

12 Elevated street passing at the turn of the century through the Roman Forum between the Temple of Saturn (*left*) and the Temple of Vespasian (*right*), which lies below the Capitoline Hill.
Photograph from Vatican Museums



13



14

The proposal, however, seems to be too tied to a desire to recreate a situation of the past. The cut of the Velia is as much a part of the present as the cut that the emperor Trajan did of the hill connecting the Capitoline with the Quirinal in order to build his forum. And the visual axis from Piazza Venezia to the Colosseum is as much a part of Rome as, for example, those opened by Julius II for Via Giulia and Sixtus V to connect S. Maria Maggiore with Trinità dei Monti.

Of the many projects being developed today in the universities, both in Italy and abroad, most try to recognize in some manner the axis of Via dei Fori Imperiali, even if its function as a thoroughfare is eliminated and excavations are carried out in the whole archaeological area. The axis could be maintained, although much reduced in width, to provide a public promenade with an ideal view of the forums below. Public transportation could also use the axis linking the metro stop at the Colosseum with Largo Corrado Ricci and with Piazza Venezia. In other words, to the east of the axis the relatively uncomplex nature of Trajan's and Augustus's forums would allow continuous access both in space and in time, giving a more public nature to the forums, and on the west side of the axis, where the complexity and richness of the Roman Forum and Caesar's Forum requires more control, access would be regulated. Connection of the forums beneath the axis would be through Nerva's Forum, which was known in antiquity as the Forum

Transitorium, because it was used as a link between different parts of the city and the other forums. Connections beneath the axis could also be made by utilizing the Renaissance structures still existing under the asphalt and gardens of Via dei Fori Imperiali, structures recently revealed by test pit digs.

Alternative locations for the much-needed museum(s) of the central archaeological area include (1) under Largo Corrado Ricci, (2) in the restored Trajan's Markets, and (3) in structures on the Capitoline Hill, which would be freed of its present bureaucratic functions. Under Largo Corrado Ricci, in the six- to seven-meter fill above the Forum of Peace, one or two museum levels could be placed. This museum would incorporate the Roman remains within its structure, while its roof would form a plaza relating directly to the modern level above. The new museum could provide a gateway to the excavated area in the same location traditionally used to enter the Roman Forum and could deal with the general urban and architectural documentation of the area, including the magnificent large-scale model of the ancient city of Rome currently housed in EUR and other reconstructed models of the single building complexes forming the central archaeological area. More specialized archaeological collections could be housed in Trajan's Markets and on the Capitoline Hill, where plans are already underway to house the antiquarian collection. Both of these locations are traditional vantage points for viewing

the archaeological area and could also become new entry locations.

One of the major problems to be resolved is how to preserve the multiple layers of history without doing injustice to any of them. The figure indicating the layering of the forums in Rome gives an idea of how complex and how rich the situation is. Goethe observed in his "Travels in Italy" in 1786 how "at the beginning it is difficult for the observer to understand how Rome succeeded Rome, and not only the new on top of the ancient, but the various epochs of the new and of the ancient one on top of the other."

The progressive increase in height of the land is due to many factors. The many sackings of Rome after the fall of the empire caused the accumulation of debris. Earthquakes and fires, common even in antiquity, were doubly damaging when structures were in a general state of disrepair and added to the rising accumulation of debris. Further consolidation of the debris occurred as a result of the almost yearly floods, which deposited layers of silt and left large areas of the city swampy. Garbage accumulated in areas no longer in use. Landfill was then purposely added by the popes to make previously unsanitary areas fit for new construction.

The urge to rediscover what was buried underneath was first felt by the Renaissance artists and architects who during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries avidly

13 Trajan's Column; engraving by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1741).

14 Plan of the central archaeological area; engraving by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1756).



15

15 View from the Roman Forum in the late nineteenth century, showing in the background the Renaissance city later destroyed by the excavations of the 1930s. Photograph from Fototeca Unione

explored and documented the ancient remains.

But their interest was not so much to preserve the Roman monuments as to learn from the uncovered material and, on occasion, to reutilize single decorative or architectural elements within their own work. In the middle of the eighteenth century, Piranesi, together with countless other European artists, exalted the virtues of the romantic ruins; and, in fact, the first timid excavations to free Roman monuments date from that time when the base of Trajan's Column was liberated. During Napoleon's brief reign, the French, under the direction of Valladier, started major excavations in the early nineteenth century; excavation of parts of the Basilica Ulpia next to Trajan's Column and many areas of the Roman Forum were started; and the Colosseum was restored and consolidated. But it was not until the turn of the century that full-scale excavations of the entire area of the forums were initiated.

Under the direction of Giacomo Boni, the entire Roman Forum and Palatine Hill were excavated, an enterprise entailing many difficult decisions as to what to demolish and what to leave standing. But, until the arrival of Mussolini, no one had the temerity to destroy a whole city that had grown up during the Renaissance on top of the imperial forums. No one today would have either the power or the desire to initiate such widespread destruction as was executed in a few short years in the 1930s. Yet we

should conclude the cycle started several centuries ago of rethinking and redefining the edges of the archaeological area (left interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War) and of completing and rationalizing the excavations within the area.

The existing structures or those restored during the excavations, whether they be ancient Roman or Renaissance, baroque or modern, could be used as museums, exhibition centers, or public facilities, to make the archaeological area alive and active. As an example, the apsidal halls on the level of Trajan's Forum could house conferences and conventions, the "tabernae" along the Via Biberatica could be information and library centers, and the shops in Caesar's Forum could be used again as shops.

There is much debate today in Italy as to what constitutes the legitimate use of an ancient structure or space. In 1985 the Colosseum was used as a container for a large and highly publicized exhibition on the economy of Italy during the two world wars. A cross section of the Colosseum was rebuilt; part of the arena seating and floor was installed. At about the same time, the Circus Maximus was used to house a summer film festival, attracting many thousands of spectators each night. In both cases, a judge later ruled that the use made of the ancient ruins was inappropriate and that in the future no such activities should take place. For the Colosseum, the use of the structure as a container for

exhibitions was not questioned, but its use for an exhibition that had nothing to do with the history or location of the monument was questioned. Had the exhibition been on archaeology, Christianity, or planning in historic areas, it would have been considered legitimate. For the Circus Maximus, it was not the subject matter that was objected to (after all, the spectacle of film is not far from the spectacle of chariot racing) but the fact that the location and size of the giant screens hindered the traditional view of the Palatine Hill that rises from the base of the Circus Maximus. Again, there is no veto against the reuse of the space, but an implicit definition of how it can be used.

The archaeological area therefore must draw its vitality and significance from its interaction with the city. It should be closely integrated with the life of the city's residents rather than serve merely as a ghetto reserved for tourists. It must become a gathering place for discussion or relaxation, just as it was at the dawn of our civilization in the valleys between the hills of ancient Rome.

The project of redefining the area of the forums will certainly go ahead, but it must be seen in its historical context. The project will not be enacted this year or the next; we must think of it in terms of decades, or even centuries. Nevertheless, we must continue our present planning and discussion to make it happen as soon as possible.