

Rome: Vital Urban Spaces and Landscapes of a Layered City

Part One

Rome, Italy

Photographs by Alan Ward 2001-2026

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

Streets

This collection of photographs is Part One of a sequence of urban spaces beginning with public streets, followed by private courtyards, and concluding with communal *piazze* and fountains, that depict the vital underlying framework of Rome, where the characteristic rhythmic and functional life of the city takes place. The network of streets in Rome is not arranged or planned in a structured system, except for later overlays at selected key locations. This relatively unorganized pattern was the result of hasty rebuilding without a coherent plan following the destruction of most of the city during an invasion by Gallic tribes in the 4th century B.C. This was during the Roman Republic, when the orthogonal grid for laying out a town had been employed by the Greeks since at least the 8th century B.C. However, it was not applied to the rebuilding of Rome. Even areas that were developed during the Empire and medieval era, including the *Campus Martius*, the flat low-lying plain along the river, consist of narrow, curving streets built in an irregular pattern. As a result, Rome does not have an overall abstract order governing the layout of the city.¹

A typical Roman street has its own distinctive character; the buildings are entered directly from the pavement without a transition and are at the same grade as the street, as if the public realm flows into buildings. A narrow street creates a sense of enclosure, and the lack of sidewalks and stairs in front of the entrances gives the street continuity, so that

the buildings make a unified wall or plane defining the curving space of the street (1-5). The immediate proximity of building entrances to the street, makes the public way feel like an extension of the buildings. Architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz describes how Roman streets in the past were lined with workshops, with activity that flowed into streets from broad openings in the buildings, that give the feeling of being inside when you are in public space. The continuous line of buildings along streets has a distinctive quality of light in Rome, composed of enclosing walls of stone that are warm, earthy tones in shades of golden brown and ochre.²

While most streets are narrow and curving, there are several notable exceptions where long, straight routes were overlaid on the prevalent meandering pattern. The Via del Corso, originally named the *Via Flaminia*, is a straight road 1.5 kilometers long, that was built in 220 B.C. to connect Rome north to the Adriatic Sea. During the Renaissance, following the development of geometrically-based perspective, two radiating straight avenues were extended south from the Piazza del Popolo to form a trident with the Via del Corso (35), including the western avenue overlaid on an existing straight corridor. While these are now significant routes through the city, it is the older “self-satisfied, enclosed world of the street that is the characteristic quality of old Rome: a complete world, a small universe,” according to

1. James C. Anderson, Jr., *Roman Architecture and Society*, 1997

2. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, 1980

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H. P. L'Orange in describing the characteristics of Rome's urban form during the Empire.³ The street is an essential shared public space that breathes the life and vitality of Rome, where the public and private realms overlap and merge.

Courtyards

While most of the streets are varied and curving in an organically evolved pattern, courtyards are idealized, private rectangular spaces, balanced designs that are symmetrically organized (6-11). Urban courtyard buildings in Rome, beginning with the ancient *insulae* (6), followed by medieval buildings (7), are structured around spaces that had a social and environmental function. The open-air courtyards within the building block, created a transition zone from the public spaces of the city to private residential zones, and made Rome a city composed of regularly-shaped platonic voids, rather than solid objects. This can be seen in Giambattista Nolli's map of Rome from 1748, that illustrates the pattern of courtyards as clearly articulated spatial voids within the irregular building blocks, that connect to the public realm. The courtyards were essential in the larger Renaissance *palazzi* to bring light and air deep into buildings with only small windows facing the street (8-11). The microclimates created in these spaces were modified by shaded colonnades and fountains for cooling. The courtyards were designed with classical visual axes to frame views from the entries at streets and to align with fountains or sculpture in the courtyards.

3. Hans Peter L'Orange, *Art Forms and Civic Life in the Late Roman Empire*, 1965

Piazze and Fountains

While streets are passages, dynamic corridors of movement, piazze and fountains are vital pedestrian gathering spaces that are symbolic of the urban culture of Rome (12-45). What are the distinctive characteristics of Roman piazze and their fountains that have made these urban spaces landmarks in the history of planning and design? A fundamental issue in any design is achieving the appropriate scale. Many of these urban spaces are relatively small, but feel proportionally ideal, because they are entered from connecting streets that are so narrow; some of the streets entering piazze are only about five meters wide between buildings (12,20). The defining buildings are appropriately scaled to allow light to enter the spaces, while the facades, especially Renaissance facades, are articulated compositions to make human-scale architectural definition of these enclosed squares. The defining walls tend to be rather flat and planar, so the bounding walls of a piazza become unified, rather than a collection of distinctively different buildings. Even the impressive Church of the Gesù is a relatively flat façade on its small piazza (18). Landmark buildings in Rome are entered from piazze, including significant churches and basilicas, however some of these buildings, tend to be three-dimensional masses rather than planar facades. The basilica at Piazza San Pietro is a three-dimensional volume with its dome and lantern, conceived by Michelangelo Buonarroti, facing the enormous piazza (26). Likewise, the twin churches at the Piazza del Popolo

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are two recognizable three-dimensional masses anchoring the southern end of the square (35). There is a wide range of sizes and proportions of Roman piazze, which in some cases, are a result of layers of the past influencing the configuration, such the origin of the elongated medieval Piazza Navona with an oval end, that follows the layout of the Stadium of Domitian, built in 86 A.D. (20-23). Some small piazze are a mere widening of a curving street corridor to make a dynamic, flowing space for a view to the façade and entry of a church, such as the *Piazza di Pasquino* in front of the *Natività di Gesù* (17).

Beginning in the *Cinquecento*, designers adopted an idealized and symmetrical geometry in the making of Renaissance squares. There are two monumental piazze, that are the most significant gathering spaces in Rome: the Piazza del Popolo (35-39) and Piazza San Pietro (26-27). Both required years of design, building, and adjustments to achieve such clearly defined urban gathering spaces. The Piazza del Popolo has its origins in a space naturally occurring inside the northern gate to the city. It was redesigned beginning around 1520 in a more symmetrical form leading to the Via Corso and two radiating avenues, however, the piazza was not completed until the nineteenth century. On a typical day, the scale of the space can feel overwhelming, however, it can accommodate major public gatherings as seen in the before and after photographs of the square following a football championship won by Roma over Lazio (39) in 2001. While the

enormous Piazza del Popolo serves as a setting for secular events, Piazza San Pietro is, of course, the most significant outdoor space for the Church. The piazza began with the placement of obelisks in front of the *Basilica Papale di San Pietro* in the 1580s (26). Following significant additions and modifications to the basilica, Gian Lorenzo Bernini gave clarity to the design of the ceremonial approach in 1656. There are three subspaces on axis leading to and terminating with the church, the *Piazza Rusticucci* begins the sequence, followed by the elliptical *Piazza Obliqua* with a pair of embracing colonnades (27), and finally the *Piazza Retta* with false perspective to shorten the appearance of the distance to the monumental church. The procession is enhanced with an upward slope leading to the monumental steps and portico of San Pietro before entering the nave (26-27).⁴

The approach of making a consciously ordered layout of an urban square is epitomized in the Piazza del Campidoglio, the civic space by Michelangelo Buonarroti, started in 1538, that has nothing of the organic, medieval quality of earlier piazze, it is a planned and calculated designed space, down to the details, with splayed buildings that open to the north to a view over the city (29-31).

Part Two of *Rome: Vital Urban Spaces and Landscapes of a Layered City* includes the following chapters: Tiber River Corridor, Landscapes with Remains of the Past, Gardens and Parks.

4. Norman T. Newton, *Design on the Land: the Development of Landscape Architecture*, 1971

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Streets











Courtyards













Piazze and Fountains







































































Notes

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