Rome: Vital Urban Spaces and Landscapes of a Layered City

Part Two

Rome, Italy

Photographs by Alan Ward 2002-2026

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

Tiber River Corridor

Rome's early settlements and subsequent urban expansion relied on critical environmental factors: a strategic crossing of the Tiber River at a natural island and immediate access to hills or plateaus with springs on tufa-stone slopes. There is little evidence of the three original tributaries that came together at the *Isola Tiberina*, the island composed of volcanic rock deposited as sediments from the connecting streams, because the Tiber is now lined with high embankments and the Lungotevere, a road along the river (1,2). The curving island and shallow waters facilitated early crossing. The island was likely created when the meandering river was split during a flood, cutting across the curve.[1] The Romans erected an obelisk on Isola Tiberina in the first century A.D. to honor Aesculapius, the God of Medicine, and it is still a medical center with the *Oespedale Isola Tiberina*, one of the major hospitals in Rome on the island (4).

The entire river was once navigable by boats transporting goods inland from the Mediterranean to the city's ports along the riverbanks, where buildings were oriented toward the water. The Tiber always had routine flooding, however, beginning in the sixteenth century a series of catastrophic floods occurred for three hundred years during a period of wetter weather. Following the last devastating inundation in 1870, the embankments and Lungotevere were constructed and completed in the 1920s. The dates and elevations of the significant floods are on a stone column in the Piazza del Porto di Ripetta (11). This flood gauge was originally positioned in a market at the same location, where grand staircases connected to one of the main river ports, until relocated for the construction of the embankments.[2]

While the river connected Rome to the sea, the Empire depended on a vast network of roads with stone-arch bridges built over waterways. By the second century B.C., Romans were able to construct large stone bridges, with a far greater ratio of wall openings to a height then had been possible before, and structurally able to withstand the Tiber floods. Piers and cores were made with a durable mix of lime, aggregate, and ash, built within cofferdams with concrete foundations to bedrock. Stone blocks were precisely fit without mortar to evenly distribute loads. Two bridges connect to the island: Ponte Cestio, built in 46 B.C., connecting to the Trastevere bank, and the Ponte Fabricio, built in 62 B.C., the oldest bridge in Rome (7,8). These early bridges have a utilitarian simplicity, however, the Ponte Sant' Angelo, now a pedestrian bridge, was built in 136 A.D. and altered in the seventeenth century to include twelve sculptural figures, comprising ten angels and two saints modeled in Gian Lorenzo Bernini's studio (6,10).

1. Filippo Coarelli, *Rome and Environs: An Archaeological Guide*, 2007
2. Christopher Hibbert, *Rome: The Biography of a City*, 1985

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

Landscapes with Remains of the Past

The ruins of ancient Rome preserve the past in landscapes that appear to act as an anchor against time, however they can impart the illusion of temporal stasis, or static quality to the city. The French-English writer Hillaire Belloc wrote in 1914 on a return visit to the city to which he had walked years before, “Rome goes on, in defiance of building speculators and developers, astonishingly the same.” [3] However, these sites with ruins have their own history with periods of neglect and restoration, as well as evolutionary change as overlays on dynamic, living landscapes.

The ruins of the Roman Forum were a convenient source of marble beginning in the Middle Ages and peaked during the sixteenth century to build Renaissance churches. The Forum was famously used as pastureland until unearthed beginning in the early nineteenth century (19,20). The Colosseum was built in a valley between the Palatine and Esquiline Hills, the southern half over a creek and pond, which is on sediments causing significant settling and damage over time, however, the better-preserved northern half is built on bedrock and mostly intact (25,26).

The Forum Boarium was the cattle market of Rome, built on the Velabrum, a low-lying area that was once a marsh along the river extending between the Capitoline Hill and Palatine Hill, and since it was prone to flooding, was unsuitable for residences. The Forum Boarium was a major commercial hub of the city with a connection to the river and setting for several major public buildings, including two of the best-preserved Roman temples, the Temple of Hercules Victor and Temple of Portunus, that date back to the second century B.C. during the late Republic. The panoramic photograph shows the two temples at a lower elevation than the elevated embankment and road along the river in the background (12,13). The Murcia Valley was originally another stream corridor and wetland extending southeast from the Velabrum. It was a linear depression between Palatine Hill and Aventine Hill, that was drained and reclaimed to build the Circus Maximus, a venue that was six-hundred meters long and designed for up to three hundred thousand spectators (24). The western end of the Circus Maximus opened directly to the Forum Boarium and adjacent river corridor.[4]

Historic sites were reclaimed beginning in the nineteenth century, and continued even more ambitiously under Mussolini beginning in the 1920s. In addition, new wider streets were cut through the dense urban fabric. One of his earliest projects aimed at uncovering the remains of the past was at *Largo Argentina,* a rectangular space

3. James C. Anderson, *Roman Architecture and Society*, 2007
4. Grant Heiken, *The Seven Hills of Rome: A Geological Tour*, 2017

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

set lower than the elevated grades of surrounding streets after centuries of accumulated fill. The site includes the ruins of four temples from the Republican era of Rome, among the four oldest buildings in the city (15-17). In addition, the Theater of Marcellus, designed to hold twenty thousand spectators, had additions removed, and was opened up to view along the Via del Mare, a new boulevard (22). The historic reclamations and new streets undertaken during the Mussolini government required removing thousands of residences and the demolition of entire neighborhoods. This pattern of the wholesale removal of parts of the city had begun in the late nineteenth century during a period of significant expansion, when numerous villas and their surrounding parks and gardens were "swallowed up by the remorseless advance of brick, stone, and mortar." [5]

Gardens and Parks

In the late nineteenth century, following unification in 1870, there was a period of growth with significant building activity, mostly without planning. While many villas and their accompanying landscapes were lost, there are two important sites that escaped demolition and later became major public parks. The site of the Villa Borghese Gardens on Pincian Hill overlooking the city, was once a vineyard, that became a private and expansive suburban villa for Pope Paul V. The grounds were originally designed in the seventeenth century in a geometric pattern along orthogonal lines. Later modifications to the design in the nineteenth century overlaid an English landscape garden. The eighty-hectare site became a public park in 1903, when purchased by the Italian government and turned over to the city to preserve the cultural legacy (27, 32-39). The Villa Giulia is a smaller scale garden that was originally outside the city, that is also now part of the public space of the Borghese Gardens. It was built for Pope Julius III and designed by Vignola from 1551 to 1553. The photographs show the contemporary garden spaces, that are associated with the reuse of the villa as the National Etruscan Museum (28).

The Villa Pamphilj on Janiculum hill is another suburban villa and garden built on the site of a vineyard, close to the city, like the Villa Borghese. The Pamphilj family also had papal connections; Giovanni Battista Pamphilj was elected Pope Innocent X in 1645. The family assembled the site in the seventeenth century and initiated landscape designs for gardens that were expanded over time to make the expression of the site more significant than the architecture of the relatively modest-sized residence. Later adjustments to the design in the nineteenth century led to major parts of the estate becoming more like an English park and garden. The 184-hectare site became Rome's largest public park after purchase by the City in 1971 (42-44).[6]

5. Christopher Hibbert, *Rome: The Biography of a City*, 1985
6. James C. Anderson, *Roman Architecture and Society*, 2007

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

The *Cimitero Acattolico* was established by the Church in 1716 as a burial ground for non-Catholics (41). The site was a remote and barren area used for grazing cattle, south of the city wall near the Pyramid of Cestius (21). It is now planted with cypresses and hollies to make a garden with over four thousand interments, including the graves of notable American sculptors William Wetmore Story and Richard Greenough, as well as English Romantic poet John Keats. English poet Percy Shelley, after his son was buried on the site, thought it so beautiful "it might make one in love with death." [7]

The last photograph is a view of a grove of umbrella pines (Pinus pinea) at the Villa Doria Pamphilj. These trees figure prominently in the city dating back at least five thousand years when cultivated by the Etruscans. The pines are emblematic of the landscape of Rome; where they were viewed as a symbol of health and vitality, as well as useful for food from pine nuts and producing wood for shipbuilding during the Roman Empire. The concluding photograph in *Part One* is a panoramic image of the Trevi Fountain. Fountains are equally potent symbols, expressive of the city's identity, engineering, and culture. It is not surprising that twentieth-century Italian composer Ottorino Respighi wrote two symphonies that are musical poems representing the distinctive identity and spirit of Rome titled "Pines of Rome" and "Fountains of Rome."

7. Christopher Hibbert, *Rome: The Biography of a City*, 1985
8. Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, 1953
9. The Letters of William James, Vol. II, 2025

Conclusion

Rome is one of the few cities that can be experienced as a work of art. There is more than an abundance of significant examples of architecture; however, it is the lived spaces of the city in streets, piazze, gardens, and parks, which elicit such profound and intense emotions. These urban landscapes of the city are vital in an obvious way, as the setting for the characteristic rhythmic and functional life of the city. However, the urban urban spaces and landscapes are alive and energized in the way that good art is also experienced as *vital*.[8] We live and occupy a spatial world, and when one is within the lived spaces of Rome, the dynamic flow of actual experience is amidst layers of the past, as well as a built form that articulates and symbolizes the inner lived patterns of human feelings and subjective states of consciousness. It is elusive to describe in words, but the artistic essence of the city is that it gives shape and meaning to the human scene as a whole. Based on the written accounts by artists and writers, this shared human environment of Rome can inspire the contemplation of an interior life that can lead to transformative experiences in one's life. I am particularly fond of the sentiments expressed by American William James, brother of Henry James, over one hundred years ago who found Rome "just a feast for the eye from the moment you leave your hotel door to the moment you return." [9]

List of Photographs

Tiber River Corridor
1. Tiber River from Castel Sant'Angelo, 2002
2. Isola Tiberina and Ponte Cestio, 2002
3. Chiesa di San Giovanni Calibita, Isola Tiberina, 2002
4. Ponte Fabricio, Oespedale Isola Tiberina, 2002
5. Basilica di Santa Sabina all'Aventino, 2002
6. Castel Sant'Angelo and Ponte Sant'Angelo, 2002
7. Ponte Sisto, 2002
8. Ponte Cestio and Isola Tiberina, 2002
9. Remains of Ponte Emilio, Ponte Palatino, 2006
10. View north on Ponte Sant'Angelo, 2002
11. Floods marked on column, Piazza del Porto di Ripetta, 2026

Landscapes with Remains of the Past
12. Temples in Forum Boarium, 2006
13. Temple of Hercules Victor, Forum Boarium, 2002
14. Arch of Janus, 2002
15. North end of Largo Argentina, 2002
16. View south of Largo Argentina, 2026
17. Tholos in Largo Argentina, 2026
18. Giardini del Castel Sant'Angelo, 2002
19. Hadrian and tomb, Giardini del Castel Sant'Angelo, 2002
20. Trajan's Forum, 2002
21. Pyramid of Cestius, 2006
22. Theater of Marcellus, 2026
23. Arch of Constantine, 2002
24. Site of Circus Maximus, 2002
25. Colosseum and Parco del Celio, 2002
26. Piazza del Colosseo, 2002

Gardens and Parks
27. Villa Medici, Borghese Gardens, 2006
28. Villa Giulia garden, 2006
29. Gardens of the Palazzo Venezia, 2026
30. Entrance to Giardino degli Aranci, Aventine Hill, 2002
31. View north in Giardino degli Aranci, 2002
32. Terrazza del Pincio, Borghese Gardens, 2002
33. Fontana del Mosè, Borghese Gardens, 2006
34. Sculpture along Viale di Villa Medici, Borghese Gardens, 2006
35. Park landscape, Borghese Gardens, 2006
36. Piazza di Sienna, Equestrian center, Borghese Gardens, 2006
37. Viale del Lago, Borghese Gardens, 2006
38. Tempio di Esculapio, Borghese Gardens, 2006
39. View from terrace, Borghese Gardens, 2006
40. Vatican gardens, 2006
41. Cimitero Acattolico, 2006
42. Arbor, Villa Doria Pamphilj, 2006
43. Park paths, Villa Doria Pamphilj, 2006
44. Grove of umbrella pines at Villa Doria Pamphilj, 2006

Tiber River Corridor





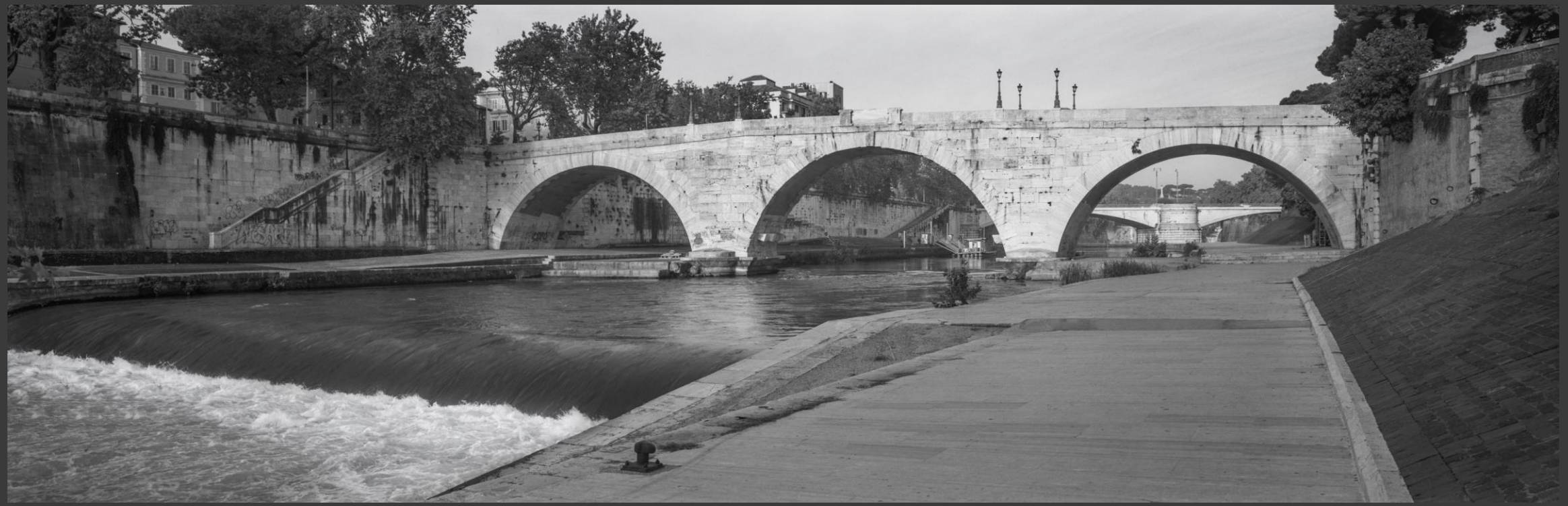

















PIO VII P M

Landscapes with Remains of the Past








MOBILI
DIVANI
TAPPETI




AZIENDA TESSILE ROMANA










CAPUT
MUNDI









Gardens and Parks






























THAT DIG IN THE WORD THAT







Notes

All Photographs © Alan Ward