

TERRAIN VAGUE: THE TIBER RIVER VALLEY

Beatrice Bruscoli

b.bruscoli@archiworld.it



Figure 1: Bridge on Via del Foro Italico looking downstream

Rome, the Eternal City, continues to be an active model and exemplary location to study and understand the dynamic transformations taking place in contemporary landscapes. In the process of becoming “eternal,” Rome has been continually—often radically—altered, while conserving its primordial image; renewing itself over time, without losing its deeply rooted structure.

Before urban form, *forma urbis*, there is natural form. As Christian Norberg-Schultz informs us, the *genius loci* of Rome does not reside in some abstract geometric order or a formalized architectural space, but in the close and continuous ties between buildings, voids, and the natural landscape.¹ Rome’s *forma urbis* was generated and shaped by the natural morphology of its landscape. Thus, to more fully understand

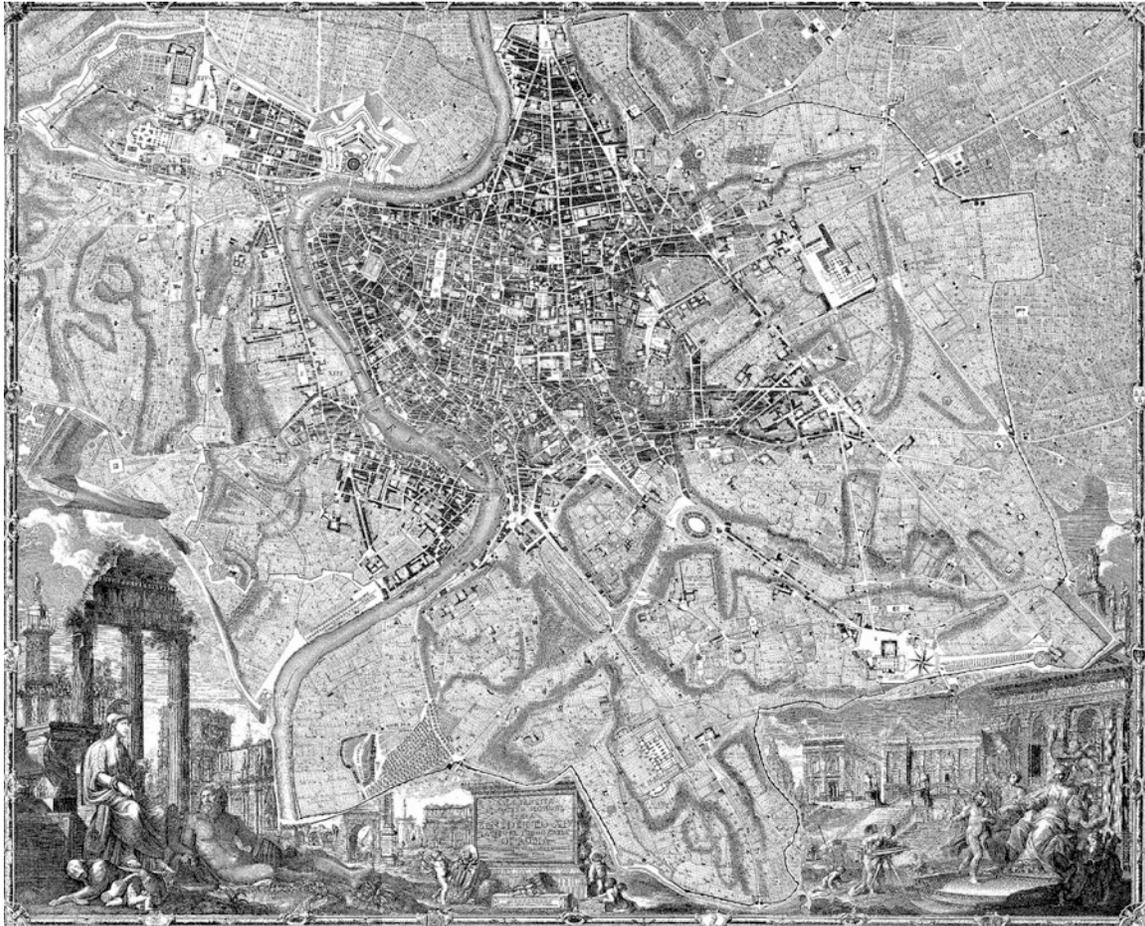
Rome—to really begin to know the city—we must walk through it, taking our time. Arriving at a gate in the Aurelian Wall, we cross the threshold and enter the Campagna (countryside) that surrounds Rome just as it has for millennia.

Looking through the multitude of images, paintings, and plans of Rome, we cannot help but notice that its primary characteristics have remained distinct and constant over the centuries. Gianbattista Nolli’s “La Pianta Grande di Roma” of 1748 is the city’s most well-known representation.² (**Plan 1**)

This remarkable figure-ground map presents us with a view of Rome; of a dense compact area of inhabitation, dotted with piazzas and courtyards, and surrounded with vast unbuilt areas all lying within the city walls. The urban

voids, which include streets, piazzas, church interiors, palace courtyards, and small gardens are its essence. This is true in the city's dense core, the *abitato*, where public spaces dominate the urban

fabric, and also in its outlying zones of uninhabited land, the *disabitato*, where the landscape, even if domesticated, has not been romanticized but appears as a more natural environment.

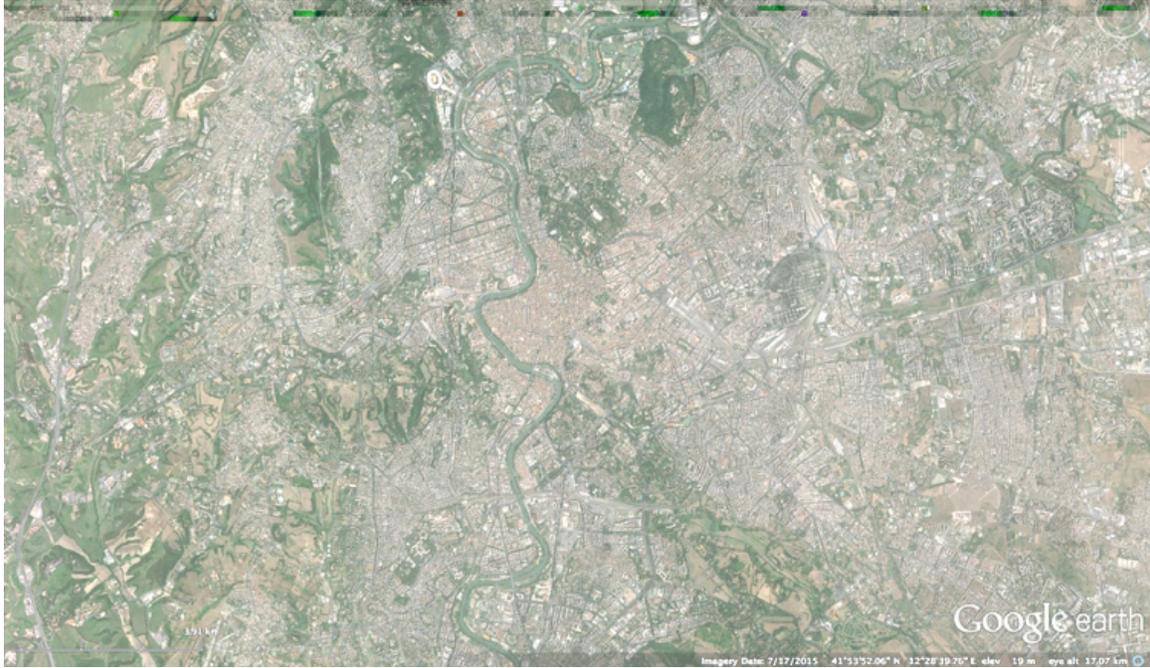


Plan 1: *La Pianta Grande di Roma*, Gianbattista Nolli, 1748

The *forma urbis* seen in the Nolli plan is the result of centuries of abandonment that unintentionally contains traces of the profound ties between the city and its original landscape, a condition that defined its consecutive and overlapping phases of urban development, including modern-day Rome: a multiform and polycentric archipelago; a metropolis of tentacles and islands of development.

The city has expanded well beyond the historic margins of its ancient walls;

radiating out from the historic center, through the city gates, and initially, along the ancient consular roads. This pattern has absorbed vast portions of the Roman Campagna, creating voids that continue to dominate the morphology of the city. This remains its fundamental figure. Viewing Rome from above, perhaps through the eye of Google Earth, we see a collection of fragments, an archipelago of differences, of divided, disconnected and dispersed urban centralities. (**Plan 2**)



Plan 2: Aerial view of Rome with the Tiber River and the Roman Campagna. Google Earth screen capture, 17 July 2015.

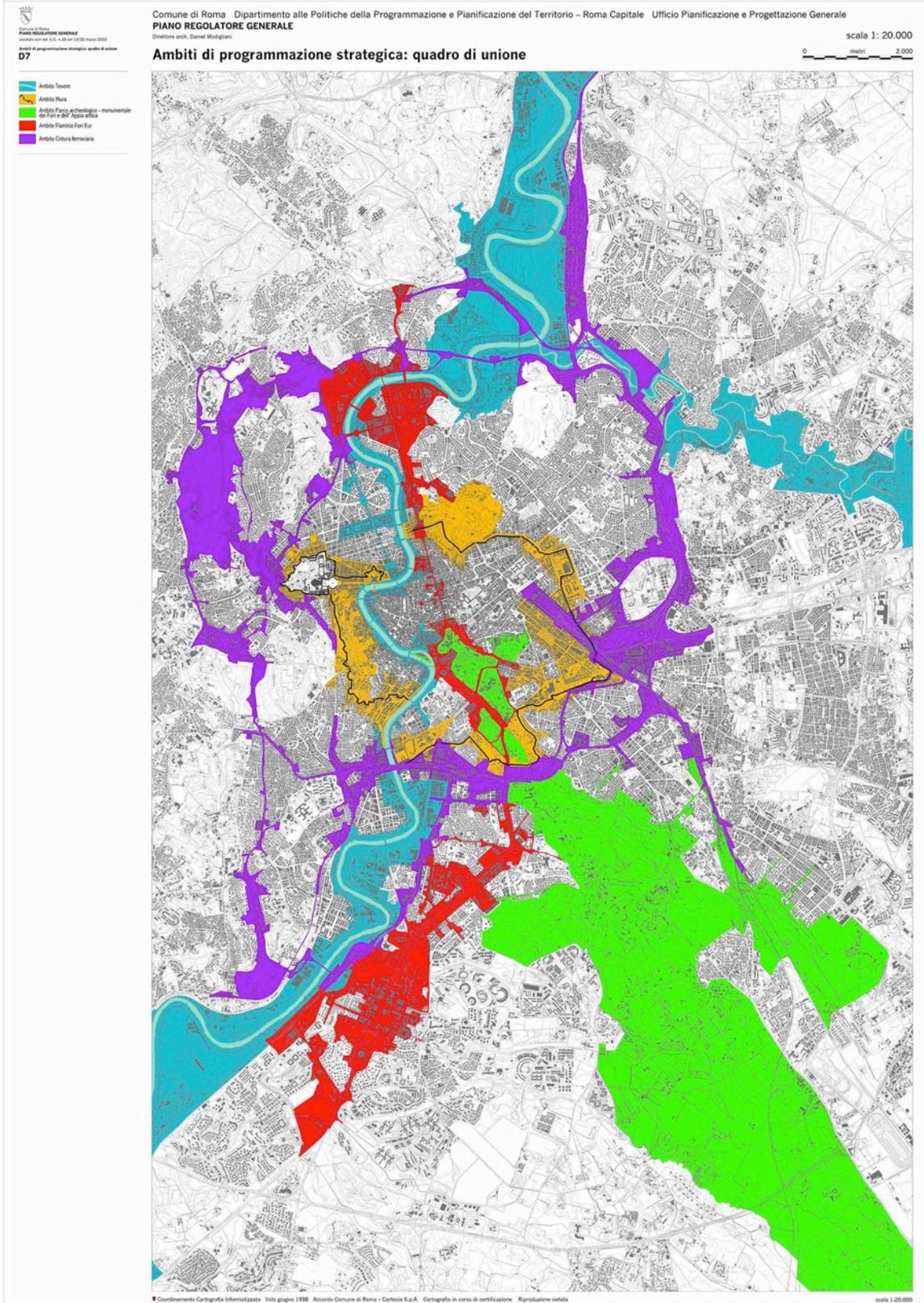
The modern city grew without conforming to the social and economic expectations of urban planners. Rather, its twentieth-century transformation is an historic amalgam of anarchy, property speculation, and well-documented complicity between developers, politicians, and individual economic interests.

Rome's urban planners have churned out several comprehensive master plans since the beginning of the century; including the SanJust plan of 1908, Mussolini's 1931 variant of his own 1925 plan, and the 1962 version with two "Varianti di Piano," amendments; of 1967 and 1974. Each plan involved years of discussion before reaching approval and implementation. Meanwhile entire swaths of the city's periphery were built following outdated ordinances or in total disregard of existing laws. Even as these plans included territory beyond Rome's walls, they were still focused on the historic urban core.

But over the last century, market

pressures, the increasing cost of living in the historic center, cheaper suburban land, and forced removals under Mussolini (and other urban renewal plans), together created an inhospitable environment that forced Romans to move far outside their walls to reside in uncontrolled sprawl. This unchecked urbanization has expanded Rome's territorial influence to engulf large portions of its region, Lazio.

This forced evacuation from the center has resulted in fragmentary typological development: there are primarily residential zones, which are fundamentally embryonic traditional neighborhoods; other zones are basically large shopping and recreational centers; there are also military districts; and finally, technological and industrial areas. Since many developments originated along Rome's radial streets—emanating from the historic center—there are large swathes of undeveloped areas, parks, and designated open space.



Plan 3: Piano Regolatore General, 2008, *Ambiti di progrmmaione strategica; quadro di unione.*

Unlike earlier plans, the 2008 *Nuovo Piano Regolatore di Roma*, Rome's newest master plan (the process began in 1994), represents a critical paradigm shift.³ No longer a monocentric planning model defined from the inside out—that is, from the historical center surrounded by a residential periphery—the new plan proposes a multipolar and polycentric development strategy. Rome, as envisioned in the new plan is a city without limits, physical restrictions, or edges. It is a city in which the voids—the absence of density—take on a distinctive new role. In this plan the voids will be the glue that holds the city together; they will provide the foundation for Rome's new infrastructure and its future development.

A critical element of the 2008 plan, as defined by Rome's municipal government, is to protect the city's environmental systems. To do this the plan focuses on recomposing Rome's physical structure by protecting the voids and the public and private parkland against incompatible development. The goal is to facilitate and more fully control current and future expansion by clearly defining the physical dimensions of allowed transformations. As envisioned in the 2008 plan, Rome of the future will be a metropolis of contiguous centralities, tied together by the protected environmental systems and the planned mobility network. To accomplish this, the plan proposes to compress Rome's collection of fragments—this urban archipelago—based on a two-tiered structure. On one level the plan works at the territorial scale, constructing a system of parks, modifying mobility through the so-called “steel cure” [the construction of metropolitan rail lines] and implementing the system

of large centralities. At the second level the plan proposes a recomposition of the existing city fabric in the Campagna—at present frayed and almost completely devoid of urban substance—with projects that clearly separate and define margins, which can then be re-stitched together. (**Plan 3**)

It is important to highlight how the 2008 Master Plan confronts and centralizes the system of voids by rendering the landscape as a “natural network” that connects and structures the archipelago of fragments. The system of natural spaces becomes a continuous infrastructure that can be crossed, integrating road and rail connections.

The overall result of the various decision making processes related to the development of the Master Plan has led to the protection of over 82,000 hectares (about 203,000 acres), some sixty-four percent of the entire municipal territory, to which we must add the 5740 hectares (about 14,200 acres) of land recovered inside the historical and consolidated city. Within the municipal territory of 1,290,000 hectares (about 3,200,000 acres) the 2008 plan identifies approximately 87,740 hectares (about 217,000 acres) of open spaces to be configured and stitched together as a continuous ecological network.

The forecasts for the Plan are encouraging, although some doubt remains about its viability. In a market economy, where liberalism appears to be the only applicable model of development and in a country where urban planning regulations have always come under strong attack, it is feared that Rome's transformation will be entrusted to those who make concrete proposals—land owners and speculative developers,

industrial interests, global tourism, and those who control the vast chains of commercial distribution. The question remains; will it be possible to consolidate the ecological network of open spaces into a resistant planning model?

In the meantime, it is necessary to continue to cross these natural open spaces and pass along the urban corridors, preferably by walking as the best means to internalize their essential qualities. This is especially relevant in the Tiber River Valley, which the plan identifies as a strategic programming environment, capable of transforming the city.

Under the new plan, the river's course is divided into three distinct sectors: 1) the northern part of the metropolitan area, that is, everything above Ponte Milvio; 2) the central area that includes the historical centre and consolidated city, that is, from Ponte Milvio to the Magliana neighborhood; and 3) the southern sector, that stretches from Magliana to the mouth of the Tiber at the Mediterranean Sea.

The three riverine fragments unite the entire city, yet each has its own recognizable and profoundly different physical and functional qualities. As the Tiber flows southward, it divides Rome into eastern and western halves, adjoining multiple environment systems, residential fabrics, monuments, archaeological areas, and infrastructures including road, airports, and naval ports.

The river's northern zone, which acts as a flood plain, is characterized by limited but significant infrastructures, including the water treatment plant, the Urbe airport, and rail corridor. There is also a network of protected open spaces, including parks, historical villas, and natural reserves.

The Tiber's central zone, the *raison d'être* of the city, that which has nurtured it and ensured its vitality for centuries, is now separated and invisible from the city. Within this densely urbanized area there is a critical need for a coordinated design effort that can help recapture the dynamic qualities that once defined the river, and encourage the transformation of the river into a new strategic infrastructure that can stimulate processes of recovery, especially along its edges.

The plan identifies four fundamental issues for the Tiber's recovery: 1) the ecological question of the riverbed; 2) increasing mobility along its edges; 3) the identification of new functional programs; 4) and the transformation of the visual relationships between the city and its river.

The southern area, which includes suburban development and important infrastructures, becomes increasingly naturalized as the Tiber heads toward the Mediterranean. In this sector, as in that north of the urbanized area, the river remains largely unembanked, and thus acts as a floodplain. Here there are ecological corridors that extend from the river into the Tiber Valley with its collection of natural parks and agricultural areas that characterize this portion of the city. There are also important archaeological areas in this zone.

The Tiber Valley, in its entirety, is a space of voids; a true *terrain vague*, that is fragmentary and yet embodies the potential for continuity; a continuity that does not rely on traditional modes of development that look to maximizing financial profit. As architects, scholars, and educators it is not only worthwhile to investigate Rome's *terrain vague*, it is critical for us to consider its ecological value, but also the possibilities it offers

to discover and imagine new ways of dwelling, sharing, and constructing the new city that go beyond outdated paradigms.

Traversing Rome along the Tiber's course helps us to understand why the Eternal City (nearly three thousand years old) continues to be a model for investigation. The river's continuous passage represents the permanent trace of the city itself, exposing its millenary existence. We see Rome as a complex and intelligent construction of public space. Along the river we see not only the dilated periphery of a generic city, but above all, we see Rome's wild and naturalized landscapes united as a dynamic paradigm of sustainable urban development that corresponds with the necessity of contemporary existence. We

see that the Tiber, running through and uniting the different cities of the Roman urban environment, is precisely one of those spaces along the margins of which different territories and ecosystems, networks, and infrastructures can come together, develop, overlap, and communicate.

The study of Tiber Valley landscape, through attentive observation and mapping of highly articulated phenomena, is in harmony with the actual complexity of the contemporary city, offering a dynamic alternative to the rigidity of urban planning, and the multitude of design proposals that are limited to the production of formal objects.



Figure 2: Bicycle path north of Corso Francia, Lungotevere Milvio



Figure 3: From Ponte Milvio looking at the bridge of Corso Francia

If we shift our investigation away from issues of formal construction to one that looks directly at the structure of the landscape, we realize a significant change in perspective. Now, the focus of our research is one that looks at the relationships existing between different components animating the urban territory and the relationships between coexisting processes of transformation that support the entire territory.

It is not the final form, but the process of transformation that interests us. Walking along the Tiber, or within the different void spaces of the city, continuing the study of Rome through its network of natural spaces, serves precisely to identify, through the act of crossing, the landscape as a model of transformation: a landscape that is layered, indeterminate and flexible.

This approach—of being ‘in’ this different space of the city—reveals a horizontal plane, an open field that has

the potential to support any type of urban activity, planned or unplanned, imagined or unimagined; it is an environment of different systems that activate a series of networks or interactions. Thus, the Tiber has the suggestive potential of abandoned areas, where anything can happen, where everything is embryonic.

This strategy, of allowing the Tiber to steal the scene as foreground while the city that surrounds it, becomes background, is critical to its future. This is especially true in the historic center. As we investigators walk through the dense urban core, the Tiber’s archaic energy, bound within embankment walls, struggles to reach our senses. In this area, the Tiber’s history is compressed between the floodwalls, which are a subtle line on the horizon that presses against the riverbanks, whose deep depression keeps the water out of reach. Once we step down to the river, below

the embankment, the river has the starring role. Here, sounds change; our focus is on the churning and flowing river. Here, the water's horizontal surface becomes a free zone, a space of truce.

As the Tiber flows south its relation to the city is constantly transformed. In the north, the landscape is confused; there are floodwalls, but they do not create an isolated space, the form of the city disappears in its fragmented construction, and untamed nature dominates the landscape. Further south, the river expands and reveals marginal spaces and the Roman periphery. Here, time is suspended, a poetic neorealist image of the past advances in a vacuum of sound. Time stops to make way for pure space. In the riparian zone along the banks there are wild birds, fishermen,

unkempt gardens, barriers, and overgrowth that hide shelters, homes, refuges, sports fields, cultivated fields, and horses; palimpsests of diversity and residual terrains.

The future of the Tiber banks is not only ecological, but also political. There is a future where, as part of the education of the architect or the average citizen, we choose to study and support the existence of these abandoned spaces, with no final objectives except to protect them from devaluation, social control imposed from outside, and economic interests of developers and speculators. This is the starting point, a place to learn about and understand the evolving landscape of the river and its city, and to accept that, even without us, this *genius loci* that is Rome continues to evolve and to exist beyond us.



Figure 4: From Corso Francia looking at Ponte Milvio



Figure 5: Ponte Milvio



Figure 6: Ponte Duca d'Aosta



Figure 7: From Ponte Risorgimento looking at Ponte Matteotti



Figure 8: After Ponte Risorgimento looking downstream



Figure 9: Lungotevere delle Armi looking upstream



Figure 10: Looking at Ponte Pietro Nenni



Figure 11: Ponte Pietro Nenni



Figure 12: From under Ponte Regina Margherita looking upstream



Figure 13: Looking downstream at Ponte Regina Margherita



Figure 14: Lungotevere Prati



Figure 15: Lungotevere in Augusta



Figure 16: Lungotevere in Augusta



Figure 17: Ponte Cavour



Figure 18: Lungotevere Prati



Figure 19: Looking upstream at Ponte Cavour



Figure 20: Looking downstream at Ponte Umberto I



Figure 21: Towards San Pietro



Figure 22: Castel Sant'Angelo's bridge



Figure 23: Castel Sant'Angelo's bridge



Figure 24: Looking upstream at Ponte Principe Amedeo



Figure 25: Looking downstream at Ponte Sisto



Figure 26: Looking upstream at Ponte Sisto



Figure 27: Looking downstream at Ponte Garibaldi



Figure 28: Isola Tiberina



Figure 29: Ponte Palatino and Cloaca Massima



Figure 30: From Ponte Palatino looking downstream at Aventine Hill



Figure 31: Porto di Ripa Grande



Figure 32: Ponte Testaccio



Figure 33: From Ponte Testaccio looking upstream



Figure 34: From Ponte Testaccio looking downstream



Figure 35: Lungotevere di Pietra Papa



Figure 36: From Ponte Marconi looking downstream



Figure 37: Viadotto della Magliana



Figure 38: Looking upstream towards Viadotto della Magliana



Figure 39



Figure 40: Before Circonvallazione meridionale looking downstream



Figure 41: Before Circonvallazione meridionale looking downstream



Figure 42: Circonvallazione Meridionale, fishing for eels



Figure 43: Towards the mouth



Figure 44: Dwellings



Figure 45: Near Via Angelo Vescovali



Figure 46: Towards the mouth



Figure 47: Towards the mouth

Notes

All photographs are the property of the author; © Beatrice Bruscoli, 2016. Please contact the author directly if you wish to reuse any images for any purpose other than personal study.

Footnotes

¹ Christian Norberg-Schulz, "Rome" in *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, (Milan: Rizzoli International) 1984

² Giambattista Nolli, *Pianta di Roma*, 1748; reprinted as *The Nolli Plan of Rome: Facsimile*, full-size facsimile portfolio; introductory essay by Allan Ceen, (J. H. Aronson: Highmount, New York), 1984.

³ *Piano Regolatore Generale di Roma* / March 2008, <http://www.urbanistica.comune.roma.it/prg.html>, and <http://www.comune.roma.it/dipterritorio/Npr/prg>