



ROMA INGOMBRATA

THE CLUTTERED CITY

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PREFACE

STUDIUM URBIS opened in December of the year 2000 with an exhibit of plan-maps of the city of Rome entitled ROMA DELINEATA. Since then a Rome-centered exhibit has been held there every December alternating between exhibits of maps and plans, and questions of urban planning in the broadest sense of the word. This year's exhibit ties into the ROMA CANCELLATA exhibit with its concern for the accessibility and use of public space.

In an earlier exhibition, entitled *ROMA CANCELLATA* (Stadium Urbis, December 2004), the point was made that over time, numerous public areas have become inaccessible to the public. This is due to the building of fences that make it physically impossible for the public to enter these areas. This tendency has continued in the intervening years, as will be illustrated at the end of this catalog.

INTRODUCTION

The current exhibition is designed to point out that many of the surviving public spaces have become so cluttered by permanent, temporary or transitory elements, that simple pedestrian passage has become difficult and at times nearly impossible in those spaces. These elements are not only limited to automobiles, parked and in movement, but also to oversized buses and delivery vans, large tour groups, and restaurants, cafés and vending stalls occupying street and piazza space.

Each of these elements will be examined and illustrated in turn. At the same time, possible solutions to these problems will be suggested, some obvious, others less so, and perhaps controversial. The intention is to raise public awareness to the problem of *viabilità* (pedestrian movement in particular) in the historic center of Rome. Viewers of the exhibition and readers of this catalog are invited to contribute email comments and reactions (studiumurbis@gmail.com).

The opposite of *ROMA INGOMBRATA* might be termed ROMA SGOMBRATA. Clearing Rome of many of its encumbrances should be a consummation devoutly to be wished by anyone living in, or visiting the city. A simple comparison of contemporary photographs of major public spaces with images of the same sites from the early 20th century reveals what appear to be two different cities (see *ROMA CAMBIATA I*, Stadium Urbis, December 2007).

The point being made here is not a wish for total return to the past, which would obviously be impossible, but rather for a readjustment of the present urban situation so as to make the city more livable for all concerned. This would require an effort by the city administration as well as by citizens, merchants and tourists alike. Sacrifices would have to be made by everyone. As in any social situation, particularly a crowded one, cooperation is essential to the benefit of all. While this, in Rome, may be deemed to be difficult, it is by no

means impossible. Indeed it may well be essential for the city's very survival as a functioning capital and world cultural center.

Rome is a very particular city, long considered a major (if not *the* major) center of western civilization. Its importance to the world is recognized by such international bodies as UNESCO. However its haphazard growth in the last century has made it very difficult to manage. That management, left purely in the hands of politicians, has been proven to be largely ineffective. The rise of local committees, fighting for the survival of their respective neighborhoods, is clear evidence for that statement. These committees and their professional advisors, often dismissed by the city administration, should instead be listened to and coordinated so as to produce a viable plan for the tutelage of public space.

PARKED CARS

Parked cars are the bane of the city within the walls. It is difficult to accept the notion that an empty, stationary metal box has the right to occupy precious public space for long periods of time, often for whole days or more. Where there are sidewalks, cars are often parked with two wheels on them, thereby restricting pedestrian passage or blocking it altogether. In narrow streets where there are no sidewalks, cars park right up against buildings, forcing pedestrians, to their peril, to walk in the center of the street. Double and even triple parked cars are the norm rather than the exception.

This kind of urban encumbrance is encouraged by the fact that most streets in the city are one-way. Indeed it would not be far off the mark to say that one-way streets were introduced in the mid 20th century more for the purpose of providing a line of parking spaces for the increasing number of cars than for improving the flow of traffic. Lines of cars parked on narrow one-way streets invariably leave only one lane free for the movement of traffic. That observation leads to a possible solution to the problem. This would be to turn most of the narrow one-way streets into two-way streets. The result would be to eliminate the row of parked cars in order to make room for traffic traveling in both directions.

Another, related solution would be to widen existing sidewalks and to build new sidewalks where they do not already exist. Curbs of sidewalks should be high enough to discourage the practice of cars climbing onto them.

People who choose to live in the center of the city will have to adapt to the notion that they are not entitled to park their cars outside their front doors. In fact they may have to consider giving up their cars altogether, or at least parking them in facilities located outside the walls. Two recent developments that are to be considered very positive and that would help in this direction are the small electric buses and the public bicycle stands.

In recent years the city government has called for plans to build underground parking in the historic center. One of these plans was to build two-level parking garages under the river roads (Lungotevere) for most of their length within the walls. This move was blocked by various groups including the Studium Urbis, but it is by no means a dead issue. A more recent plan whose construction was well underway until the recent change of mayor, is the building of a seven-story parking garage within the Pincian hill, underneath the belvedere overlooking Piazza del Popolo (Piazzale Napoleone I°). This is discussed in a separate section of this paper.

All these plans would result in drawing more cars into the already traffic-obstructed city center. This is the exact reverse of what should be done, which is to limit the entrance of automobiles to the area within the city walls. In late November 2008, a plan was announced for expanding parking areas outside the walls and next to public transportation terminals. This seems to be a more reasonable approach, but it has yet to be executed, and is not the only answer to the problem.

Summing up, it should be clear that automobiles must be made to adapt to the city and not the city to the automobiles, as has been the rule in last half century.

VANS AND BUSES

Over the last thirty years the city has seen both an increase in the number of delivery vans entering the historic center as well as an increase in the size of these vans. Indeed many of them hardly qualify as vans and should be described as trucks. It is hard to exaggerate the confusion and the serious blockage of traffic caused by these vans. They often block traffic altogether when they stop “temporarily” in the middle of a street in order to load or unload. Their obtrusion is so great that even pedestrians are often prevented from getting around the blockage caused by these vans.

The ancient Romans had an interesting solution to this kind of problem: all delivery carts had to be out of the city by daybreak. While this might seem to be a draconian measure to apply to delivery vehicles today, an adaptation of this rule might reasonably be adopted: truck and large van deliveries could be limited to the hours of 6:00 to 8:30 am. After that time only car-sized vans would be permitted, and those only for perishable goods. Do clothing, furniture and bottled beverages really have to be delivered to center city during the working day? They could be brought into town before 8:30 am on weekdays, or even on Saturdays.

With the exception of the welcome addition of the small electric buses mentioned above, ATAC, Rome’s public transport authority, has continually increased the size of its buses over recent years. Since the turn of the century double-length, jointed buses have become a common sight on the city streets. While the latter may work in other capitals, they are surely not adapted to Rome’s street net. Not even the post-1870 “wide” streets such as Corso Vittorio Emanuele II° accept these leviathans easily. Since the latter are usually on express lines, they often overtake the local buses so that the unnerving sight of these large vehicles traveling two abreast is not uncommon.

BARS, CAFES AND RESTAURANTS

There is no reason to tolerate the rampant expansion of bars, cafés and restaurants onto public space that has occurred in recent years. However the city government does seem to tolerate it, probably because it receives revenue from this practice. At the same time it makes no effort to regulate the public spaces it permits these entities to use, nor to limit their number in specific neighborhoods.

An example: Campo de’ Fiori has twenty bars, cafés and restaurants opening onto its space. Another seventeen are located on nearby side streets. The proliferation of these entities

has taken place within the last twenty years, at the expense of local food shops and other small commercial enterprises. A predictable side effect is the frequent drunken brawls that take place there at night, requiring the nearly constant presence of city police in order to keep the peace.

All of the bars, cafés and restaurants on the Campo have pushed their tables, umbrellas, planters, space heaters and enclosing fences further and further out into the public space in the last ten years. This has been encouraged by the removal in 2002 of the raised rectangular area at the center of the Campo, which formerly forced vehicles to keep closer to the edges of the space, thereby limiting the occupation by tables and chairs.

Campo de' Fiori is a large piazza, and could be considered as possibly adapting to this kind of intrusion. However smaller piazze do not share this kind of flexibility. Consider the example of Piazza delle Coppelle. Until recently this piazza was occupied only by a fruit and vegetable market which was set up in the morning and taken down in the afternoon. A restaurant moved in and started occupying the small amount of piazza space left. The rest is often occupied by parked cars. The result, as the photograph reveals, is that there is very little open space left in the piazza, which is now quite impassable for anyone wishing to traverse it to get from Via delle Coppelle to Piazza in Campo Marzio.

*As this catalog was going to press, an *Epolis* article appeared (6 December 2008, p.21) headlined *Overdose of new bars, pubs and cafés: the historic center appeals to the Mayor*. Appeal by the Council of the 1st Municipio [Rome within the walls]: too many bars, pubs and cafés in the historic center. "We request that the Mayor intervene...to block the granting of licenses for new bars, pubs and cafés in the I° Municipio..."

A classic case of closing the barn door after the horse has escaped.

FREE PUBLIC SEATING

From past centuries we find a fair number of public benches built onto the façades of major palazzi or placed in open spaces for the use of the citizens and tourists. The best example of this practice is the bench along the front of Palazzo Farnese. Other examples include the bench on Palazzo Ricci facing Piazza de' Ricci and the one on the incomplete Palazzo dei Tribunali on Via Giulia. In the more recent past, free-standing marble benches were built on the raised central area of Piazza Navona and in the area next to the Arch of Janus. The most recent example is the one saving grace of Meier's Ara Pacis building on Piazza Augusto Imperatore.

These free seating areas, as opposed to the paying seating areas of outdoor cafès, have always been used and appreciated by both locals and visitors alike. But recently there seems to have been a move to gradually eliminate the use of these civilized symbols of urban comfort.

Temporary fencing appears frequently in front of Palazzo Farnese, preventing the use of the benches by the usual mothers watching their children playing in the piazza, and by people simply sitting and enjoying a rest or reading a newspaper. Security was the reason given for the placement of these barriers two year ago, but public pressure forced their removal. Now they are back again.

The bench at Palazzo Ricci was a favorite meeting place for the students of the nearby

Liceo Virgilio, who socialized there before and after classes. Apparently their noisy liveliness caused the owners of the palazzo to place large terracotta planters along the full length of the benches, thereby completely preventing their use not only by the students during their limited times there, but also by anyone else wanting to sit and rest or admire the lovely piazza.

No sooner were benches placed next to the Arch of Janus in the late 1990s, than they and the arch were fenced off completely from public access (see *Roma Cancellata*, Catalog 10, p.30). The result is that these benches have never been in use. This is a clear example of the right hand not being aware of what the left hand is doing.

Steps in front of buildings have often been a favorite place to sit, especially for younger people. Apparently the Church finds this innocent practice to be indecorous because the steps on the corner of the Vicariato building in Trastevere and those behind S. Maria Maggiore were fenced off in the late 20th century. About the same time the elegant porch of S. Maria della Pace was fenced off, but the three steps in front of it remained accessible. A few months ago these steps received the same treatment as the Palazzo Ricci benches: large planters placed along their full length.

It is interesting to note that while little is done to prevent cars from parking in forbidden places (Piazza Farnese for example), pedestrians are denied their traditional public seating with impunity.

TOURIST GROUPS

Pilgrimage and tourism are a major part of Rome's economy, so this discussion is not an attempt to limit it. However it should be apparent that movement of large pedestrian groups through the city can cause both confusion and obstruction, and should therefore be regulated in some way.

In terms of increase in size, tour buses have kept up with the larger public buses, to the point where capacity of 55 to 60 passengers is the norm. Tour companies have taken advantage of this by walking whole busloads of tourists through the city streets under the leadership of a single tour leader. In other words, tour guides lead much larger groups today than they did twenty or thirty years ago. The result is long, snake-like groups winding their way through the narrow streets of Rome, frequently blocking the narrower ones by sheer force of numbers. Other pedestrians have a difficult time getting past them or through them. Their numbers also cause confusion at traffic lights on the larger streets. The only ones who gain from the greater size of these groups are the tour companies.

A simple solution to this would be to oblige tour companies to limit the size of the group to no more than 25 per tour guide. Through the tour guide, city police could fine any company that broke such a rule.

PINCIO INGOMBRATO: The lost park

The Studium Urbis was an active participant in the effort to stop the hollowing out the Pincian hill in order to build a seven story parking garage for 750 cars. This project was begun at the behest of the city government under Mayor Veltroni who declared that it would enable the Popolo trivium (Tridente) to be cleared of automobiles by providing parking spaces for them

under the Pincio gardens. Digging began in late 2007 in spite of the presence of the ruins of a Roman villa on the site. The remains of this villa had already been discovered in a lightning fast excavation of the belvedere overlooking Piazza del Popolo (Piazzale Napoleone I°) in September 2004, and lasting five weeks. At the end of that period the excavation was filled in and the piazzale was repaved.

At the same time that the Mayor was quoted as saying that there were no ancient remains on the site, Studium Urbis published photos of the excavation on its website in which the presence of *opus reticulatum* masonry clearly proved the remains to be ancient. These were the only photos available at the time since none were forthcoming from the city; they appeared in a few publications, though the major press kept silent about the discovery.

The project was deemed to be superfluous by its opponents since no more than 100 meters from the Pincio gardens there was already a two story parking lot under the Gallopatio of Villa Borghese, outside the city walls. This lot was almost always more than half empty, and could easily be connected to Piazza del Popolo by means of an underground passageway, like the one that already connected the same lot to Piazza di Spagna. Despite the opposition by such luminaries as the urbanist Italo Insolera, the project went on with a long fence being built enclosing about half the gardens of the Pincio and extending well into Villa Borghese (see Fig.***). The ruins of the Roman villa were revealed once more, and trucks started taking out large quantities of earth from the eastern half of Piazzale Napoleone I°.

The April 2008 elections caused the leftist city government to be replaced by a rightist one. Mayor Alemanno, after consultations with a team of experts, decided in September to block the project, probably for political reasons (see Fig.***poster), and work stopped at the end of that month. As of this writing (early December 2008), the work site remains unchanged, with the holes unfilled and the green fence still shutting off much of the Pincio gardens. The Mayor has promised to start restoring the site to its original condition in early 2009. *On va voir.*

VILLA BORGHESE

One of the oldest, and arguably the most beautiful, of Rome's public parks is beset by a number of factors that intrude on what should be a peaceful, unencumbered green area in the heart of the city. The state expropriated the villa from the Borghese family in 1901 and renamed it Villa Umberto I° (a name that never really replaced the old one). In 1908 a bridge and causeway was built linking the villa with the Giardino del Pincio, thus tying it into the area within the walls.

To the detriment of its quietude, the villa is bisected by a traffic road that links Porta Pinciana to Piazzale Flaminio, just outside Porta del Popolo. The use of this road is limited to buses and official vehicles. The road parallels the four-lane Viale del Muro Torto which follows the Aurelian walls between the same two terminal points. For the purpose of ridding the park of vehicles, thought should be given to rerouting this traffic either onto the Viale del Muro Torto or onto streets along the east side of the villa.

Failing that, the cross-town roads through Central Park in New York City could be used as a model. These roads are sunk no more than four meters into the ground, and are so well masked with flanking vegetation, that Central Park visitors are rarely aware of them. In the Villa Borghese a similar road with accompanying bridges could easily be built. In fact there is just

such a precedent in the villa itself. In the mid 1820s Luigi Canina designed and built two bridges over the sunken Via delle Tre Madonne which once separated two parts of the villa. These bridges were so designed that anyone crossing them was unaware of the road below. The 1908 bridge to the Pincio (mentioned above) is another example of the same idea. Exactly a century ago, urban projects emphasized pedestrian movement. Today they emphasize vehicular movement.

The presence of the traffic road bisecting the villa naturally encourages vehicles to enter it. Electric buses, whose ostensible purpose is to bring visitors to the Borghese museum, enter from this road and circulate through the park unnecessarily. Their terminal, on the avenue leading to the museum, is further away from that building than the gate on Via Pinciana, the street that defines the eastern border of the park. Cars too enter from this road and park around the Casino dell’Orologio.

Another road through the park, Via del Giardino Zoologico, is used daily as a parking lot. The city provides parking in the Villa Borghese under the Galoppatoio, not far off. But since one has to pay for that privilege, that lot is rarely more than half full. A simple solution to this intrusion by cars into the villa would be to close the gate at Viale delle Belle Arti, leaving only the pedestrian entrance open. Cost to the city: zero.

The great open space at the center of the villa, known as Piazza di Siena, has had a history of public use for unusual events such as the early flights of hot-air balloons in the mid 19th century. The site is also well adapted for equestrian events. Unfortunately the latter have become so drawn out, that today the area is removed from normal use for three months of the year. The preparation of temporary seating and the setting up and taking down of pavilions, as well as the cleaning up of debris after the events involve the intrusion of heavy vehicles into the park. During these events, which are reserved for ticket-paying customers, a temporary fence, enclosing not only the Piazza di Siena, but also surrounding spaces, keeps normal park visitors out.

This author finds the disruption of the park by these events to be intolerable, particularly because it takes place in the Spring, when the park is at its best. One solution would be to build a permanent structure for these lengthy events on the barren site of the Galoppatoio, which was the last, and least important addition to the Villa Borghese. The advantages would be numerous. Parking in the underground lot would be immediately at hand, and the confusion caused by the setting up and taking down of temporary structures would be avoided. Rome would also gain a permanent outdoor location for special events.

ROMA CANCELLATA II

At the inauguration of the *ROMA CANCELLATA* exhibition at the Studium Urbis on 17 December 2004, an architect working for the city’s Soprintendenza declared that the closure of the public spaces under discussion was “*tutto regolare*” (all perfectly correct and legal). This perfect example of a bureaucratic assessment highlights the city government’s indifference to rights of citizens in their use of public space. Public space, as the term itself suggests, belongs to the citizens and visitors of Rome, not to the city government, whose sole function in this respect is its preservation, both in terms of maintenance and accessibility.

Regardless of the political party in power, the relentless fencing off of formerly accessible spaces in the city continues to this day. The double meaning of the word *cancellata* in Italian sums up the result: *cancellata* = fence; *cancellata* = canceled, erased. The city fenced is the city erased. Illustrated below are examples that have occurred since the 2004 exhibition and catalog.

Via Alessandrina

From the 2004 *ROMA CANCELLATA* catalog (p. 34):

“Cat. 13. The only street of the Renaissance neighborhood called Pantano to survive demolition in the 1930s was Via Alessandrina. Since the 1998 excavations of the Imperial Forums, fences at both ends of the street limit access.” Two illustrations follow this entry, showing the fence and gate at the northern end of the street. Their titles are self-explanatory: “Sometimes open” and “Sometimes not.”

Today the gates are always closed.

The permanent closure of Via Alessandrina means that Via di Campo Carleo, the very useful connection between Piazza del Grillo and Via Alessandrina, is also inaccessible today. It also vindicates an observation about another site in the same catalog (p. 3): “the presence of this enclosure is a threat to public use because at a whim of a city official, the gates can be closed on a more permanent basis.”

Foro Romano

From the 2004 *ROMA CANCELLATA* catalog (p. 3):

“The free access to the Roman Forum starting with the Jubilee year of 2000 was hailed as a great step forward, but not many are aware that when one had to pay an entrance fee, 30% more of the Forum area was visitable than after that date, thanks to the low railings now enclosing much of the Forum area which was formerly open to the public.”

Since March 2008, free access to the Forum has been cancelled, and the entrance fee has been reinstated. However the “low railings now enclosing much of the Forum area” are still there.

Piazza Augusto Imperatore

The 1930s building on the south side of the piazza has a wide passageway connecting through to Via Tomacelli. In 2007 this was provided with a stout metal fence and gates. The gates are closed at the whim of the café which occupies a considerable part of this formerly public space. One unforeseen result is that homeless sleeping shelters have been built up against the fence at various points.

Arco degli Acetari

One of the few surviving medieval corners of the city is a tiny piazza just off Via del Pellegrino, opposite the flank of Palazzo della Cancelleria. On three sides of the space are small medieval houses with external stairs (only a few of the latter survive in Rome). In 2005 a gate was built at the entrance of the arch. This gate is kept closed at night in order to keep out rowdy elements from the nearby Campo de' Fiori.

Castel S. Angelo

In the 1930s the Fascist city government cleared the inner and outer moats of Castel S. Angelo and set up a park surrounding the castle. Until 2008 this park was always open to the public. This year iron fencing has been built across the two approaches to the park. The fence is provided with gates which are open during the day, but not at night.