

Episodic Urbanism: Pedagogical Studies and the Lesson of Rome

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In spite of the previous century's abuse, Rome remains perhaps the most remarkable "library" of spatial experience in the world. The encounter with this city, foreign yet familiar, profound and contradictory, will inevitably question any students' design priorities. The studio work of Pratt Institute's School of Architecture in Rome has made a consistent effort to learn from the physical and perceptual discoveries that the city offers and in particular to engage and understand its figurative interconnectedness. The investigation begins not with Rome's principle monuments and familiar public spaces, but with an examination of several specific urban artifacts that coherently exhibit episodic linkages. Their spatial continuities will be emphasized as a critical value, in that it can empower the individual by virtue of recurrent opportunities for choice in the simple determination of one's way. These considerations are then introduced as implicit requirements in a hybrid design program to be located at the center of the historical city. In its entirety the project is intended to act as a mirror to the cumulative quality of the city's larger context to which they will become interconnected. Rome is the labyrinth into which each student will step. All that which has been familiar will soon be lost. To find a way out one must proceed with constant attentive curiosity. The city requires a different understanding as to place and orientation, reliant on coming to know the unique integrated relationship between an incremental part and a larger, not quite comprehensible whole. It is a knowledge that will be constructed cumulatively, but with it, each student can begin to build a bridge back to what they already know.

INTRODUCTION

In spite of the previous century's abuse with regard to its more anonymous urban fabric, Rome remains perhaps the most remarkable "library" of spatial experience in the world. The encounter with this city, foreign yet familiar, profound and contradictory, will inevitably question any students' design priorities. The studio work of Pratt Institute's School of Architecture in Rome has made a consistent effort to learn from the physical and perceptual discoveries that the city offers and in particular to engage and understand its figurative interconnectedness, what has been called its exterior interiority ¹. Rome is the labyrinth into which each student must step in order to inevitably lose their way. All that which has been familiar will soon be lost. To find a way out one must proceed with constant attentive curiosity. The city requires a different understanding as to place and orientation, reliant on coming to know the unique relationship between an incremental part and a larger, not quite comprehensible whole. It is a knowledge that will be constructed cumulatively, but with it, each student can begin to build a bridge back to what they already know.

PEDAGOGY

The pedagogy of the Rome Studio is divided, perhaps somewhat typically, between two parts: an initial investigation into Precedent, to be followed by a longer project phase dedicated to formulating a Proposal. The precedent investigation begins not with Rome's principle monuments and familiar public spaces, but with an examination of several specific urban artifacts that coherently exhibit episodic linkages. Their spatial continuities will be emphasized as a critical value, in that it can empower the individual by virtue of recurrent opportunities for choice in the simple determination of one's way. The artifacts selected are to be understood as fragments of much larger and more varied urban narratives. Whether comprehensible as a singular monumental element (Castel S. Angelo, Vittoriano, Campidoglio, Trajans Market) or an assemblage of conjoined spaces that can include a recognizable public space (Aqua Paola, Piazza S. Pietro in Montorio, Piazza Quirinale), they are all, in fact, characterized by an episodic sequence of sectionally interconnected spaces.

The initial analytical precedent exercise requires the student to break down the whole into its individual moments or episodes. This will provide the basis for an extrapolated game of transformation by way of reassembly, and is the speculative point of departure for an architectural intervention to be located at the very center of the historic city.

The physical/spatial artifacts are to be investigated first hand, measured and documented according to more conventional analytical considerations- in plan, section and unfolded section. They are broken down further by analyzing the spaces in figure/ground, in Nolli figure/ground, and with regard to perceived spatial boundaries and defining axial centers (see Fig. 1). With the analytical documents in hand, the student is asked to disassemble the artifact into its component parts and then to reinvent it: to devise a series of strategies that will change the relationship of parts to part and part to whole.

The artifact becomes like a unique tool, a Swiss army knife combined perhaps with a folding ruler. Each device of the knife (space) is unique relative to its prescribed function or shape, but connected to the next at a hinge point. As such, it can be unfolded and configured in a nearly unlimited number of ways to address whatever aesthetic or programmatic tasks might be invented for it. Given the de-contextualizing of the object by its removal and isolation and the absence of any new requirement for performance, the requested transformation is a research into the matrix of possibility, an exercise to understand first- the categories of transformation, and then- their representation through example (see Fig. 2).

The emphasis on taxonomy requires the use of the comparative method for critical evaluation. Certain configurations will be selected as better illustrating the stated formal characteristics. These selections are then

modeled in three dimensions as “solids” (see Fig. 3). Students tend to be more facile at handling objects and shapes and so examining a space as an object is more comfortable. It is something of a Trojan Horse however. The “casting” of the spaces is the catalyst for one final transformation/reconsideration of the original precedent: that of scale-first, recognizing the potential of the exterior-interiority of the city’s residual space to act as actual interior and secondly, to more tangibly grasp the relationship between city-building-room.

DESCRIPTION OF THE EPISODIC ARTIFACTS

1- Via di Porta San Pancrazio / Aqua Paola

The Fontana dell’Acqua Paola is a most prominent monument, both up close and from a greater distance, which are the only two ways it can really be viewed urbanistically. From the center of the Ponte Sisto it is framed, day or night, as part of a pairing, together with the Fontanone di Ponte Sisto, essentially the beginning and endpoints of Pope Paul V’s reopened aqueduct of Trajan, bringing the lake waters of Bracciano. Within the intermediate neighborhood of Trastevere, the fountain disappears completely from view.

The itinerary begins at the base of the Spanish Academy where a section of the axial via Arenula crosses the via Garibaldi. There is a small marker, an oblong basin fountain, easily missed, situated at the curved corner. Traversing the arduous ramp of a hill, one passes on the right, mostly concealed by a garden wall and forever closed to the public, the 18th century baroque grounds of the Arcadian Academy. On the left is a late 19th structure that houses the Spanish Liceo Cervantes school that steps steeply up pretending to disregard the slope. This concludes with a monumental stair of three stories framed by a now emergent fragment of the Aurelian wall on one side and a retaining wall to the Piazza dell’

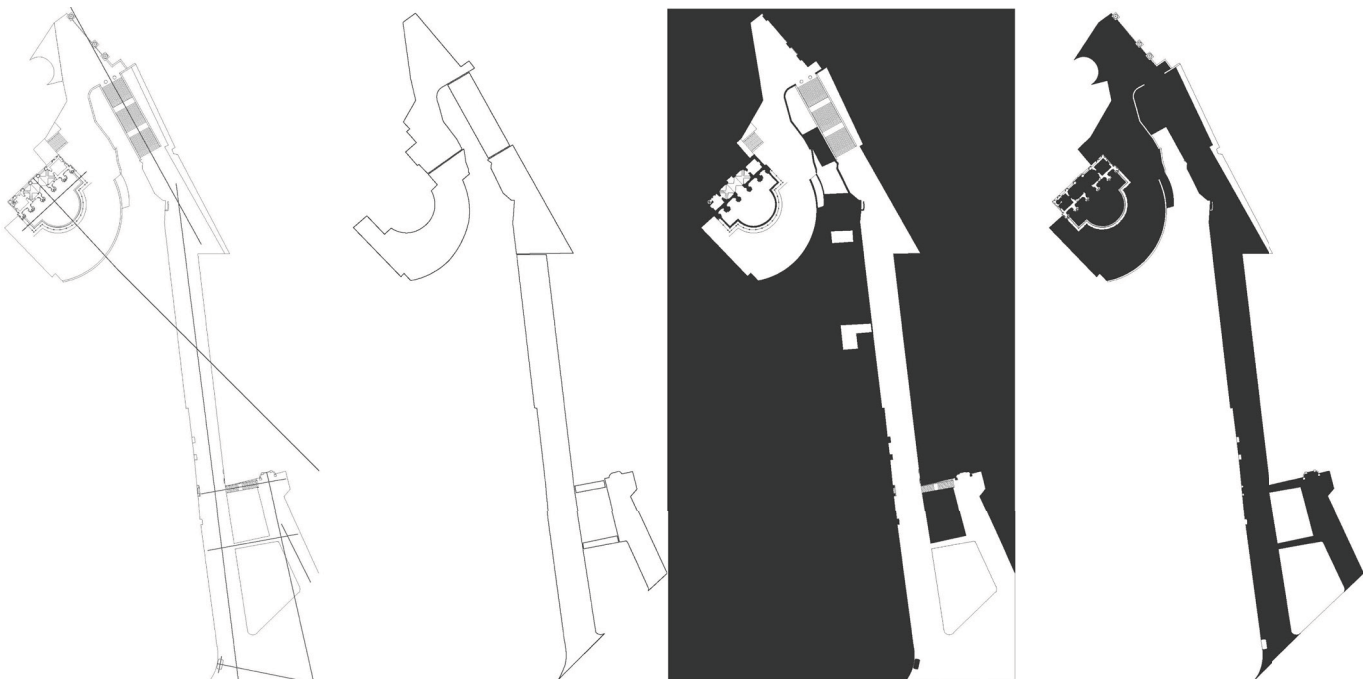


Figure 1: Documentation and analysis drawings (artifact 1)

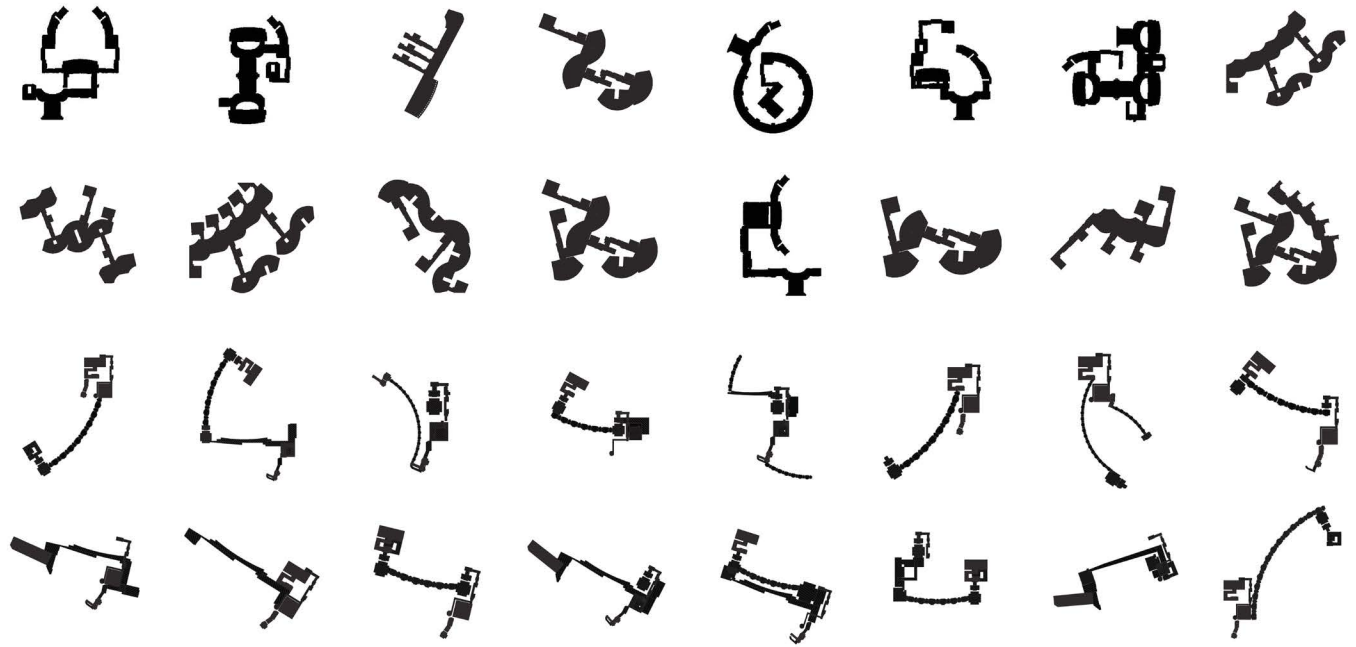


Figure 2: Recombinant taxonomy (artifact 2)

Acqua Paola on the other. Scaling the stair, one can see looming, the urns atop the gateway that leads to the Parco Garibaldi with its parapet promenade that holds the noonday canon.

To pause at the top offers another unexpected and eventually preferred opportunity. Moving left one approaches the narrow side elevation of the Aqua Paola, which then quickly unspools into the space before its great fountain façade, and the crashing cascade of its waterfalls. Constructed in 1612 under the patronage of Pope Paul V, its elaborate white marble façade is the result of a dismembered Forum of Domitian. It becomes the stage from which an actor's panoramic gaze can look back out across the entire city of Rome.

2- Monumento al Vittorio Emanuele II

Sometimes called the last Roman monument the Vittoriano was for many years closed to the public, and thus little more than enormous commemorative obstacle. With its reopening, both inside and outside, it once again offers a lesson in urban manners. While clearly succeeding in its attempt to stand out and above, its height dominates from a great distance and from any location, while its terminal position at the end of the axis from the Porta del Popolo announces the city's central destination. But it also presents two primary urban itineraries. The first scales the monument by choosing a direction from the symmetry of options and passing between steps and landings, scaling (like Trajan's Column)

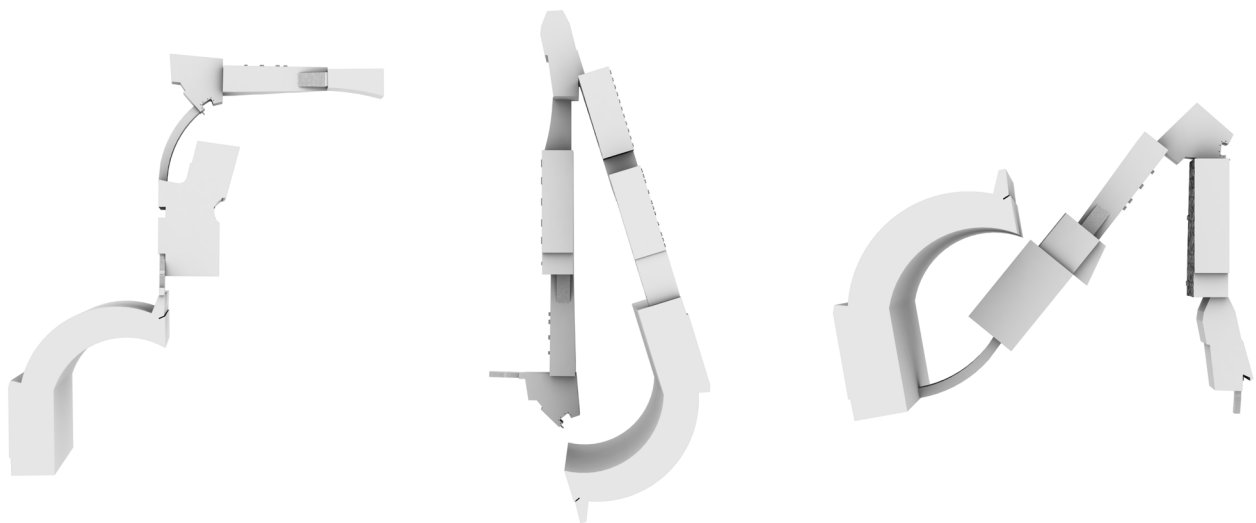


Figure 3: speculative models (artifact 3)

the vertical dimension of the removed Quirinale spur. Upon succeeding to the upper plateau the path leads around to the rear where it connects to both the upper landing of the Scala S. Maria in Aracoelli, and a rear terrace over the Museo Risorgimento. It then links back around to the Campidoglio in unexpected camaraderie. The inside is, of course, its own remarkable sequence of 19th century excess.

3- Via di San Pietro in Montorio

The façade of the church of S. Pietro in Montorio, sitting roughly parallel with the central church of S. Maria in Trastevere, is only visible at distinct moments from the Medieval street pattern below. Its travertine surface and prominent circular rose window is, however, immediately recognizable when the labyrinth takes a turn and the view to the top of the Gianicolo opens up.

Situated along a dogs leg corner in Trastevere's more remote fabric there is a honed travertine stair, pointing skyward toward the adjacent Spanish Academy, with its single enormous, always empty, always watching studio window.

A quick skip across the via Garibaldi with a brief pause for traffic takes one to another stair, this one shallower and of brick, a kind of horse ramp that leads solemnly past the stations of the cross. It switches back at what might be a small chapel gradually rising to a height above the plateau of the city's cornice line, and thus gaining a panorama across the rooftops to the finger hills of the west and even the Apennine mountains in the distance. At the crest one finds the triangulated Piazza S. Pietro in Montorio before the church facing down the Aventine hill. Bramante's Tempietto remains secreted within its shaded courtyard.

DYSLEXIC PARAMETERS- DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT SITE

Trajan's Market has recently reopened as a museum of the imperial forums. Since the late 1980s the excavated boundary to these forums has been shifting relative to the contemporary city, in effect growing the archeological park and reducing the traversable area of the "livable" city. The re-revealing has moved forward with a confidence in spite of the absence of a clear plan for reconciling the sectional intersection of past and present. The two levels must ultimately interact and resolve their pending confrontation lest the temporary solution, the retaining wall, the signifier of occupation, become permanent.

The inclusion of Trajan's Market into the forum complex is perhaps prophetic as it stands as a clue from at least two different periods that can each suggest a resolution of boundary. The via dei Fori Imperiali, however, remains the elephant in the room, a grand avenue bisecting any desire to make the past whole, and too critical to vehicular traffic to be removed or relocated.² It therefore stands guard by default over the insatiable appetite for more excavation and archeological museification.

Mirroring the position of Trajan's market, directly behind what would be the western exedra of Trajan's Forum is an open area defined primarily by its verticality, an edge of the Capitoline hill. It is an area whose vicinity has undergone constant reevaluation and peripheral transformation since the early Renaissance. As one can see from Lanciani's plan the Imperial setting of the hill was primarily unbuilt landscape. The rock

escarpment has always presented a problem for, but not an impediment to, intervention, whether Imperial (the Forum of Augustus and Trajan's market in particular) or post-imperial (Campidoglio, Cordonata, and monument of Victor Emmanuelle). This sectionally problematic and irregularly configured area was the site selected for the studio projects intervention. It traverses the entire vertical ascent/descent from the floor of the Forum of Caesar to the crest of the Capitoline hill.

Michelangelo's project for the Campidoglio reoriented the Capitoline hilltop, reversing its face from that of the Forum, the center of the Imperial city to the Campus Martius, the medieval core lying beyond it. The monument of Victor Emmanuelle repositied an absolute hierarchical dominance for the Capitoline hill entering the 20th century, shifting its center again, raising its vertical overlookingness and lookingtoness, and giving it a more literal axial relationship with the corso and a neoclassical perspective for the city's larger urban plan.³

But the area immediately around it was altered forever by an act of erasure performed with clear conscience during the height of the fascist era. Its purpose was part of an "opening up" of the historic center- to the health of light and air, to the avenue of parade, to the speed of the automobile, and to its most "valid" imperial and historical symbols. Mussolini's plan concluded by constructing a physical connection between the present (Palazzo Venezia) and the past (Coliseum) the parade route of the via del Imperio. It dissected not only the Imperial Forums but required the wholesale demolition of the Alexandrian district, an area repopulated in the 16th and 17th centuries, thus clearing the void that now stands before or between the cumulative hilltop appearance of Victor Emmanuelle, S. Maria in Aracoeli and the Campidoglio on one side and the extant remains of the forums of Augustus and Trajan on the other.

The three projects of the Capitoline hill stand together in a somewhat symbolic embrace- each has been allowed to remain by virtue of its supreme importance individually, and yet collectively, they present a lesson in architectural "compromise" at a nearly heroic scale. As such, they stand in for what has been lost, the repetition of that very same lesson as it had been applied in all diverse manner within the urban context that has been wiped away.

The site also holds certain remnants, urban anomalies waiting to be addressed. Witness the church of SS. Martina and Luca by Pietro da Cortona, one of his master works that has lost all relationship to its ground and is quickly becoming a nearly inaccessible island unto itself. Or the Carcere Maritimo, now buried to a "present" level, or Armando Brasini's entrance to the museum of the Risorgimento, a fascist era addition that interacts quite persuasively, if indirectly, to reconnect the hilltop with the triumphal avenue below.

Reconciling the sectional dissonance between the ancient and modern levels was a principal task of the studio. Within this circumstance was an intended opportunity, to learn from the urban lessons of the city of Rome itself, so as to order and to integrate the present with the past, not as part of a museum, but as tactile layers of a still living history.

THE HYBRID PROGRAM

The intention of the assigned architectural program is multivalent. First, to address the limitations of the retaining wall as a means for connecting the city's disparate ancient and contemporary levels. Second, to provide for a variety of interconnected spatial itineraries that can ascend/descend the Capitoline hill: public, semi-public, and private. The sectional lessons of the initial exercise were intended to provide a nearly unlimited set of possibilities for challenging the circumstances of this particular site and negotiate the vertical schism between the lofty height of the Capitoline hill and the valley floor of the imperial forums. And third, to satisfy the requirements of the three primary programmatic elements while also determining a logical relationship for them:

Element I: Forma Urbis Romae

An institute for historical and contemporary urban studies, independent, nonpartisan think-tank studying issues related to cities and urban development

Element II: Chamber Music Performance Hall

Performance hall seating 350 people which can also be used for conferences associated with the museum/think tank

Element III: Gallery of the Historical Maps of Rome

Itinerary on the evolutionary history of Rome including such critical maps as the G.B. Nolli Grand Plan and Rodolfo Lanciani's Forma Urbis in its original size

Each of these three primary programmatic elements come with distinctive demands. By being conjoined, the hybrid result must address individually (through exhibition, performance, assembly and housing

(included with the think tank)) as well as collectively the ongoing issues of contextual integration. As a whole the project is intended to act as a mirror to the cumulative quality of the city's larger context.

The student projects are effectively one additional version of the precedent exercise that preceded it, one more re-assembly of the episodes, only this time making an effort to also include issues related to site and program and the preservation of pre-existing connections (see Fig. 4, 5) The hybrid problem promotes combinatory thinking about program and its manifestation as form. The precedent exercise offers a tool box of parts, episodic sequences that are tied back to actual experiences and that can be tried and tested in relationship to the new context. To research and consider strategies of assemblage and joinery is really to reexamine the city itself. Rome's urban body is the composite building project writ large. It is in fact, too large to come to terms with in a single semester. Nonetheless, the examination of an individual moment is to reflect upon the relationships between the scale of the hand to that of the mind. It is appropriate that the critical representation of this work is in section, where the synthetic relationship between parts is revealed.

Through these efforts the student may come to terms with a very different possibility: that of being a contributor to something much larger than themselves. This realization will hold even greater significance for where the student may go next. Because the desire to be unique in ones work and to achieve acclaim for being unique has now been put into a relationship with what might be necessary to improve and contribute to the public good. And with the idea of a civic good comes a different responsibility.

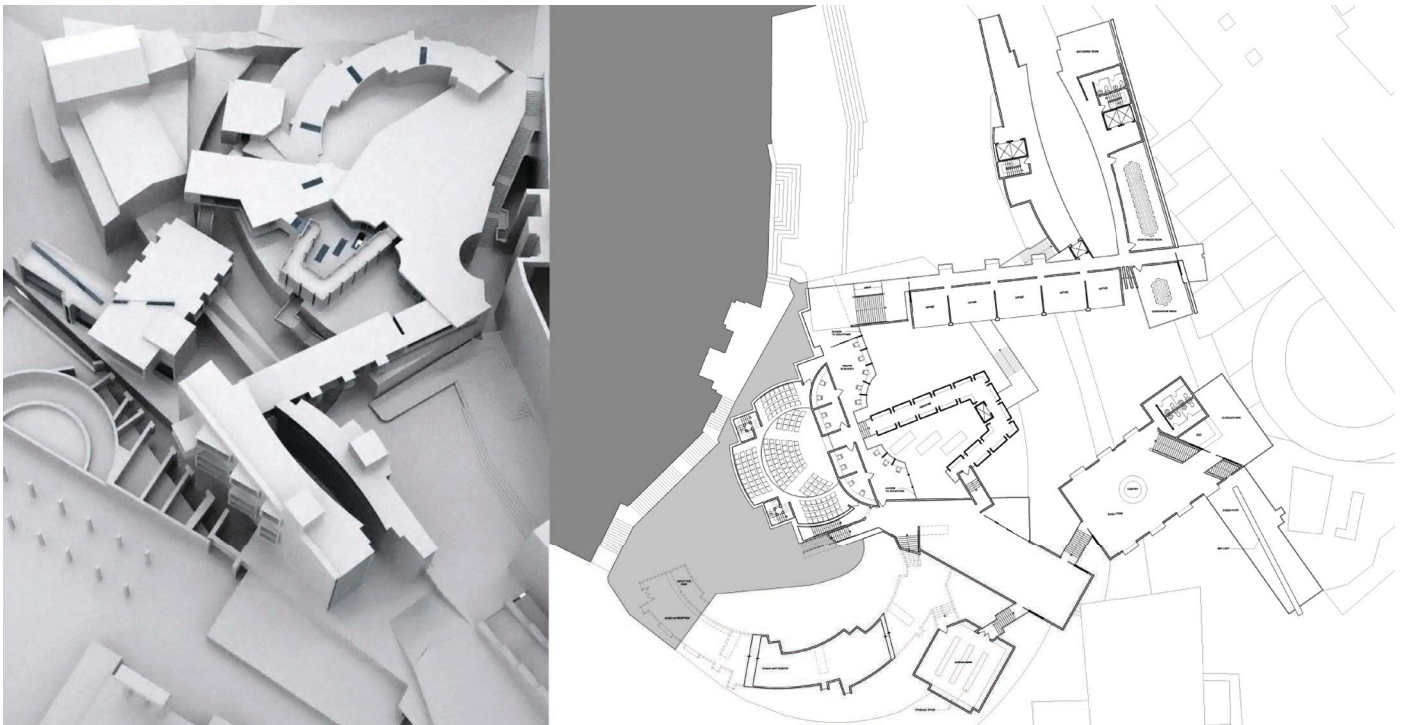


Figure 4: model and plan of the proposal (Naciem Nowrouzi)

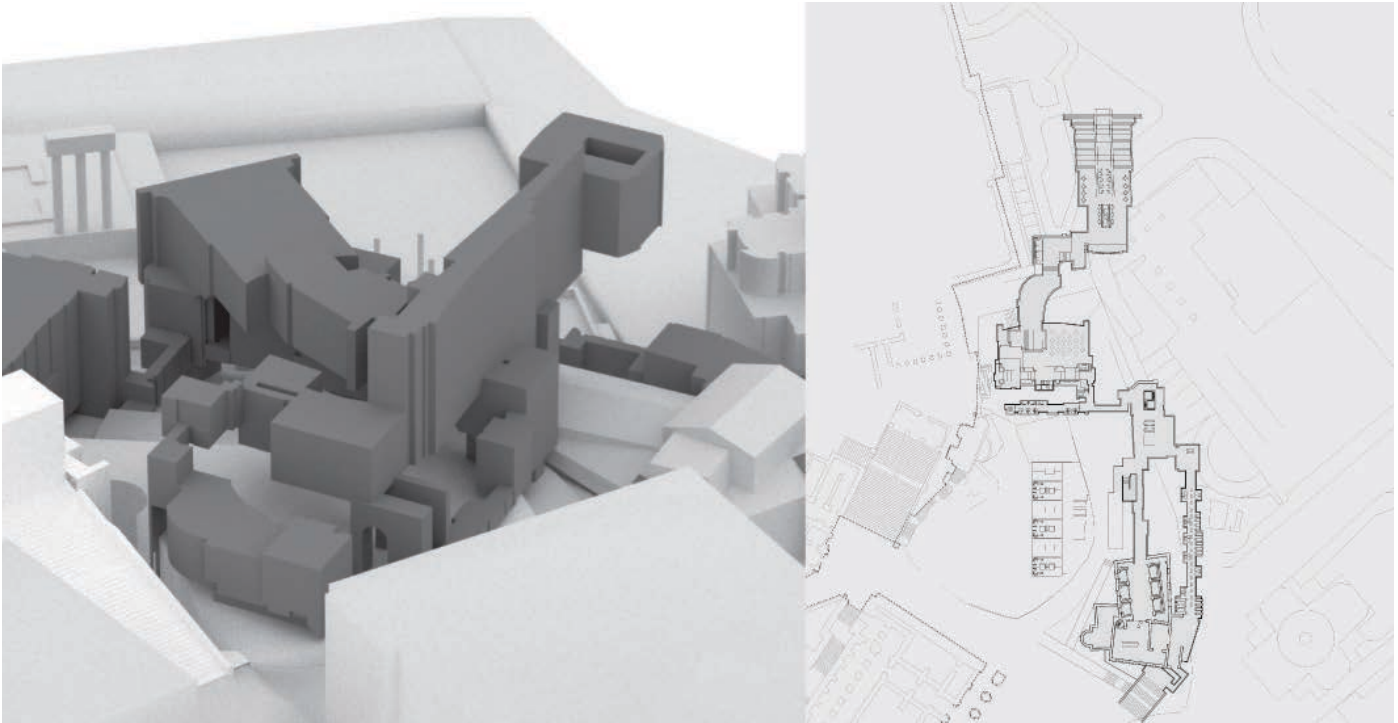


Figure 5: model and plan of the proposal (Roger Richard)

ENDNOTES

1. Norberg-Schultz, Christian. *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. London, 1980. *He says quite specifically "Rome deserves its epithet of the Eternal City, not just on account of its long history but also because of the significant character of its urban environment which has kept its identity right up to the present day... The idyllic intimacy of the Roman ambience has always been stressed: wherever you are, you are inside."*
2. The via de Fori Imperiale is now a landmarked street.
3. *Belly of an Architect*. Directed by Peter Greenway in which an American Architect is in Rome assembling an exhibition within the Vittoriano on the French neo-classical architect, Etienne-Louis Boullée, presents the city consistently and repeatedly with this imposed axial perspective order, which can be achieved through the process of disciplined editing but is something quite difficult to sustain experientially and urbanistically.