

The Pocket Neighborhood: Small Scale Intervention in the Jewish Ghetto of Rome

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INTRODUCTION

We have an obligation, as architects, planners, designers, and lest we forget, as citizens, to alleviate the pressures placed on urban centers today by the heavy hand of modernity. In my best estimation, we must adjust our scope of intervention, to a smaller, more specific one, to effectively thwart the “sameness” that modernity seems to cultivate today. Historically cities accrue and that can often times account for the uniqueness of a given city. As part of a design community I believe we can actively seek the slow evolution of a city. In fact, it seems it could be our duty to ensure that cities not be defined and redesigned in large gestural sweeps. But rather communities, ethnic identities, and the individuals must be recognized as a primary design determinate.

La Città Vecchia seemed to concur with this evolutionary idea and could potentially serve as an example today under the condition that, both, La Città Nuova and La Città Vecchia learn to cope with contemporary pressures, for instance the plethora of motor vehicles, the excessive speeds at which they travel, the omni-present pedestrian, increased trans-global mobility lending to more tourists, rendering sidewalks and streets impassable. Once these impending issues are addressed at the neighborhood scale, then can we build La Città Nuova based on the paradigm of La Città Vecchia. That is to say, the hybridized palimpsest of the old city becomes the model from which we can study the evolutionary growth of cities.

Cities evolve... so why is that when we think to intervene today, we renovate, remove, raze, and rebuild with such enormity and scope??

As Rome’s population and urban mass continue to grow, partially due to expansive strides in urban planning, a phenomenon ensues — distinctive pocket neighborhoods that dot the medieval fabric with colorful unexpected accents, such as the Jewish Ghetto, are becoming obscured.

This design project — a rethinking of the Jewish Ghetto, attempts to exemplify the ideas of evolutionary growth, reflecting a working palimpsest and a city growing in the face of modernity without eliminating the essence of a neighborhood.

Secondarily this project is a cultural project, aimed at addressing some issues that plague many uprooted minority cultures today, cultures that face the wielding hand of urban modernization and globalization. The Jewish community in Rome is one such cultural minority that is being threatened, not only by modernity and vast city planning, but also, historically, by Catholicism. Through the means of architectural intervention on a specific neighborhood scale I have tried to provide a counterweight to the heavy hand of modernity, that which seems to diminish the cultural essence of Rome’s Ghetto.

I’ve marked four modest sites in the neighborhood which I feel warrant redefinition following their demolition in 1870 by virtue of

their significant social, cultural, religious, historical, urban and architectural importance coupled with their contemporary application as a social communal space. Drawing on the physical Ghetto of the past (1555-1848), recovering pieces and reinserting those pieces in a contemporary spirit is the organizing design characteristic of this project.

The premise is that architecture imbibes culture. Culture imbibes tradition, ritual, and rite. If a culture is denied its architecture, if an architecture of a cultural precinct is eliminated, for whatever reasons — urbanization, modernization, and/or globalization, the neighborhood’s race and ethnicity suffer a loss of identity. Conversely, if a lost architecture can be partially recovered (acknowledging that it can never be fully recovered) and is then united with a contemporary setting, formerly camouflaged identity can be unveiled — poised to cultivate itself again in a contemporary guise.

MORPHOLOGY

The Ghetto in Rome is the oldest in Europe. Although its official naming of “The Ghetto” wasn’t decreed until 1555, at which point it became a walled precinct, the Jews lived a life of subjugation dating back to the time of the Emperor Titus in 70 AD. It is well known that the Jews have had a 2000 year history in Rome, living predominantly a life of confinement throughout their sojourn there. For most of those 2000 years the Jews have always lived in the area that can be loosely defined as the Ghetto today — along the Tiber River, sometimes flanking both sides of the river. For a brief period the Jews were relegated, at the hands of the Pope, to live outside the Aurelian walls during the early Middle Ages. Today, however, the area strictly defined as the Ghetto is found in the Southwestern quarter of the city, flanked on the Southern edge by a sharp bend in the Tiber (*Tevere*) River, across from the Tiber Island. In 1848 the Ghetto walls came down and by 1870 Italy became a unified country at the victorious hands of soldier Giuseppe Garibaldi. Shortly thereafter, the then placid Ghetto was razed and rebuilt as an offering by the city to embrace the 20th century. Many Jews moved to the outlying reaches of the neighborhood, poised to move back in as soon as housing was completed. However, many Jews willingly relocated to newer neighborhoods, with no emotional connection, across the entirety of Rome. This was the beginning of what older generations began to acknowledge as the dissolution of Jewish culture — the absorption of the Ghetto into Rome. By 1904 a dominant feature of the new neighborhood was complete — the Synagogue. Slowly, the 20th century mixed-use buildings filled in around the Synagogue, reshaping the former Ghetto into what we see there today. The Jews moved back in, minus the substantial contingency (roughly 35%), that found new secular neighborhoods to



Fig. 1. Jewish Ghetto of 1555 indicating four sites of intervention.



Fig. 2. Jewish Ghetto of today indicating four sites of intervention.

establish as their home, most of which were outside the Aurelian walls in the rapidly expanding suburbs.

ORIENTATION

The Ghetto is located in the Historical Center of Rome and nestled within the thick medieval fabric of the city. Its strongest natural, physical element is the Tiber River. The medieval fabric defines the north and west edge while the eastern edge is bound by the Theater of Marcellus and its ruins. The neighborhood forms a rectangle with one aberration which lies to the north of the Ghetto rectangle. In 1824, just 20 years before the Ghetto walls were torn down, the Pope ordered an expansion to the Ghetto. A medieval block was appropriated to serve as that extension to the neighborhood, adding a city block and another 3 gates to the walled precinct. The Ghetto, at its maximum, inhabited 7000 Jews in an area less than 33,000 square meters (4 city blocks with no building exceeding 5 stories). Most of the enclosure around the Ghetto was actually building mass. There were a few portions of actual wall that were constructed. By 1824 the Ghetto had 8 points of entry — 8 gates. All were monitored by the official gentile gatekeepers — the Mattei family.

These 8 gated sites became the physical center for this project. Ultimately, I chose to intervene upon just 4 of these sites. It was, indeed, threshold that revealed the unique relationship between the Jews and the Catholics of Rome and became the ironic device for this anomalous culture to densify and strengthen. These gated moments imbibed the polemic nature of these two cultures. As I began exploring the idea of inserting elements at each one of these 8 original gated sites, integrating my historical research with the current needs of the community I deemed four of the sites to be the most appropriate to build upon. Those 4 proved to be more relevant historically, architecturally, ephemerally and socially while simultaneously marking the four contemporary corners of the Ghetto.

In establishing a program I relied on traditional use of space and current social trends. I observed that the Roman Jews truly personified the idea of community — meaning that the act of “communing” was a vital necessity for the neighborhood. News has always been spread by public announcement and news today follows the same type of dissemination. When word comes from Israel regarding the latest political situation there, people gather in the streets to discuss it. When the head rabbi, Elio Toaff, has some new legislation to offer the community, word passes through the streets, shops, and restaurants. In the days prior to Unification, prior to the demolition of the Ghetto, the Jews were able to claim public space as their own, even if it was within walls. To them, being confined was sometimes a moot issue, the importance lay in the fact that they had place to commune. Their synagogues were being closed down. They could no longer rely on them as meeting places so consequently the “piazza” and the “street” became the communal space. From 1555 to 1848, the Ghetto was riddled with piazzas, albeit small and cramped, but they were well used as neighborhood meeting places. Today, although living conditions are far superior than in the days of the walled Ghetto, there is a lack of usable public space. Two piazzas exist, but have been rendered parking lots. Cars line the now wide streets, and vehicular traffic races through the neighborhood with little regard for the pedestrian.

In response to these issues a macro-neighborhood design strategy was developed. The need for public space enhancement, parking and traffic reorganization, and most importantly, the need for cultural tradition to blossom became the organizing design issues.

Supplementing the macro-neighborhood design was the micro-site design was the individual understanding of each of the four sites as its own potential neighborhood amenity i.e. a public market, a river access park, a playground, and a neighborhood entrance piazza.

The final design determinates were the solely contextual. Each site is organized about three contextual elements:

1. The Plan footprint

The 4 sites have been inserted into the foot print of the old 1555 Ghetto and serve as the modern piazza reminiscent of the old. When the Ghetto was rebuilt there was a subtle shift in orientation of the building mass, resulting in small differences of **plan footprint** from the old Ghetto to the new Ghetto. I've proposed to reveal that footprint by allowing it to emerge to the surface of the contemporary Ghetto and by inserting these new interventions into that old footprint.

2. The Wall

Wall is appropriate to most any project set in Rome due to its importance in Roman history. It served as a defense mechanism and shielded Rome from multiple assaults over the course of millennia. Due to the strength and over-engineering of Roman architecture, walls often served multiple purposes. The Aurelian wall was so thick that it became inhabitable in places and today there are homes found within it. It's interesting to note that the primary purpose of wall in Roman history is not necessarily for structural support. In this project the use of **wall** is a linear space defining element, not a volumetric element, which is fragmented marker in many places so as not to sever the piazza from the neighborhood.

3. The Narration

As in other art forms, architecture often needs a narrative to accompany the piece. There is always a story, a history, a narrative behind the piece, yet it is usually made immaterial to the completed project. Each of the four sites in this project has a unique story behind it. That story has been explicitly revealed through the use of language and text. Latin, Hebrew, and Italian have been the languages of the neighborhood, historically as well as currently and by inscribing/ applying Hebrew, Italian, and Latin text throughout and upon the 4 neighborhood interventions a **narrative** is provided to the user.

DESIGN

SITE I - Portico d'Ottavia

The Portico d'Ottavia is the portico (entry vestibule) to Octavian's Forum which dates back to 146 BC. From the time that the Jews migrated to Rome, following Titus's sack on Jerusalem in 70 AD, they slowly began occupying the area around Octavian's Forum. The Portico d'Ottavia eventually became the icon of the Jewish neighborhood and is today considered the marquee of the Ghetto.

The design of this piazza stages the Portico so as to bring its iconic quality back into being. By creating a slightly sunken piazza about the Portico, it is rendered the central figure again. The piazza I've created assumes the **footprint** of the original Ghetto plan.

The piazza doubles as an open air market, reminiscent of the fish market that once stood in this very place. The space, although sunken to slow the speedy traffic, allows for vending carts to easily descend into the space making for a typical daily market situation where vendors wheel carts in and out. This amenity potentially accommodates the newly disgruntled consumer of the neighborhood that has more difficulty accessing the Campo dei Fiori market due to the light rail train that has recently been built between the two neighborhoods.

By creating this sunken plaza in the middle of this intersection, traffic has been dead ended and sedentary pedestrian space has taken its place. This was a necessity if the neighborhood was to become a pedestrian friendly zone. There have actually been discussions to make the neighborhood completely pedestrian — but only discussions. This doesn't seem likely however, so here I've proposed a compromise. The changes I've suggested are to slow the traffic and not allow for through traffic. This should not create any vehicular difficulties since the Lungo Tevere, which runs along the river just two blocks away, is a major through-traffic expressway.



Fig. 3. Portico d'Ottavia showing wall and Hebrew inscription through photomontage.

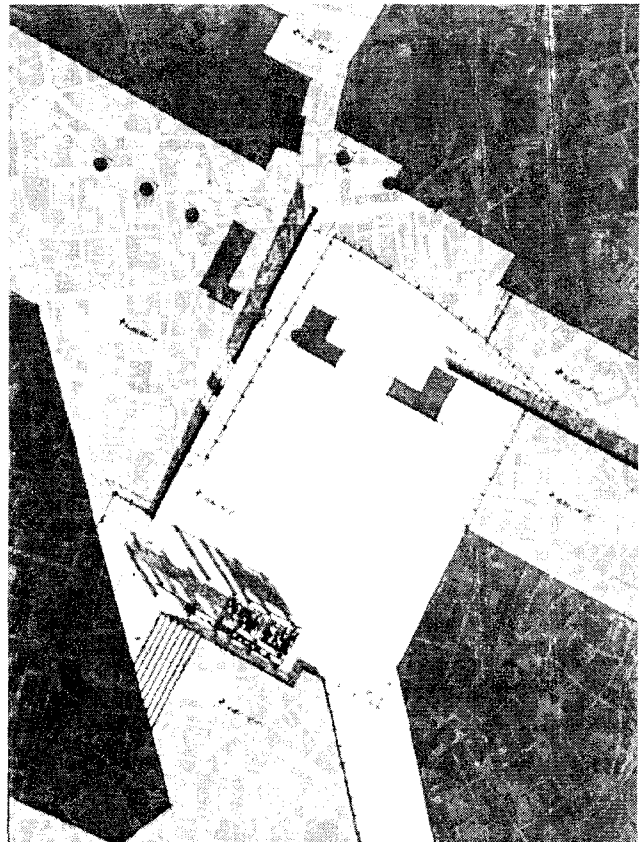


Fig. 4. Plan of Portico d'Ottavia site design.

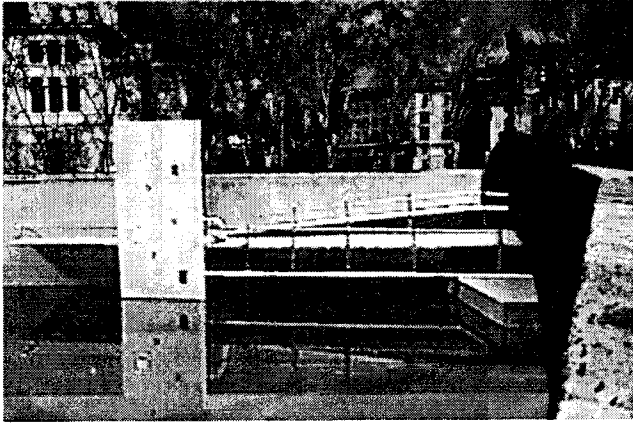


Fig. 5. Ponte Fabricio showing descent to river through photomontage.

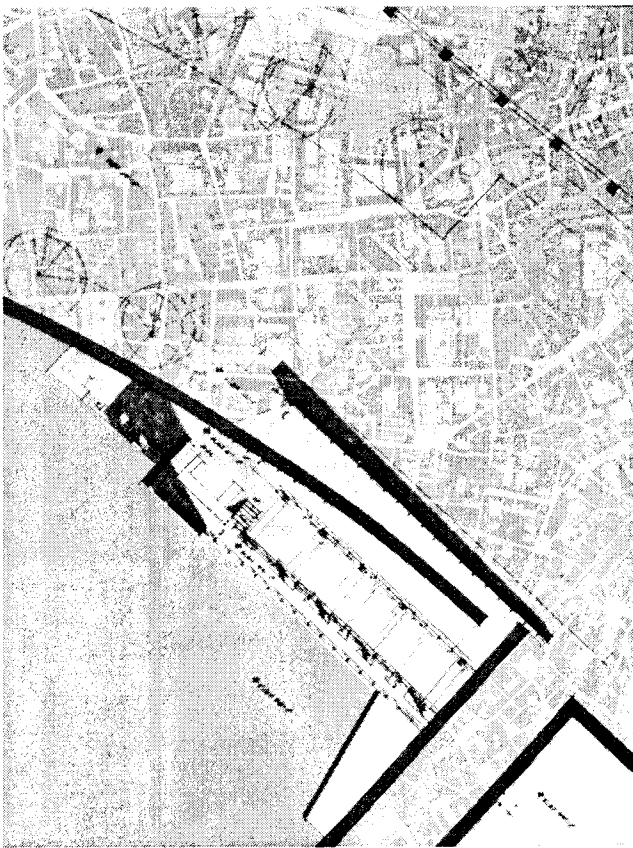


Fig. 6. Plan of Ponte Fabricio site design.

Along the western edge of the piazza I've inserted a space defining **wall** which, from 1555-1848, was actually defined by building mass. In the Southern portion of the piazza I've inserted a small, wide-flange frame structure which houses an information kiosk serving as bulletin space, a source for community announcements as well as information for tourists and the occasional passersby. During market hours it is to be staffed by a member of the community. The kiosk is clad in synthetic panels which display faces/images of those who occupied the Ghetto during 1555-1848. By attaching faces with these contemporary events I hope to evoke certain emotions and memories, even to the non community member. This **narration** ensures that we not forget who and what once stood here. In addition, traces of Hebrew and Italian text are sporadically inscribed on the primary space defining wall. All of the

text is from the first book of Moses — Genesis. I've selected Genesis because this part of the neighborhood has always been considered the origin — the genesis — of Jewish life in Rome.

SITE II - Ponte Fabricio

This site, named for the Bridge Fabricio, is unique to all the other sites I've selected throughout the Ghetto because of its adjacency and relationship to the river. The Ponte Fabricio is noteworthy since it is the oldest standing Roman engineered bridge in Rome, dating back to 62 BC.

The historical role of this site is that the river bank used to be made of building mass. It was the living spaces of the Jews that confined the river to its path. At the turn of the 20th century those homes were razed to provide space for the Lungo Tevere (the major vehicular arterial along the Tiber River). Supporting this road today are the massive river embankments that form the river edge built around the same time as the synagogue (late 1890's). During this construction, some of the original land was cut away, rendering the Ghetto area slightly smaller.

Informed by this memory, I built back into the area that was removed, nestled between the Ponte Fabricio and the 20th century embankments. But rather than fill in the void with volume, I inserted multiple ramps and platforms that playfully connect the street level above with the river level below. The newly inserted platforms follow the old **footprint**, and reach out over the water only as far as the homes reached that once stood there.

This area, during the official Ghetto days, was called the Ripa Giudea (Jewish Shore). The Jews could actually access the waterfront through the homes that lined the river. This was one of their few liberties. They often used the river as a source for food, water, and recreation. Beyond the practical resources of the river, this shore served a much greater ephemeral purpose.

The Ripa Giudea was described as the place in which this segregated population could widen their gaze toward a more ample horizon, instead of the usual minimal cramped distances within the Ghetto proper." (*Il Ghetto Racconta Roma*, p.15, translated by Leah Martin)

There major deterrent (there always was one) with this location was that the Tiber flooded on a regular basis and would inundate the houses along side it, bringing stench, disease, and silt.

With all this in mind I've designed the main platform to rest at the height of the first floor of the homes that once stood there. The platform is grated so when flooded, the water and silt will easily drain from the surface. The multiple ramps and platforms allow for one to occupy that space over the water no matter what the river level — unless of course the water has risen above the embankment altogether, which is quite rare these days. The plinth below, built at water level and large enough to receive sunlight during the latter portion of the day, lies just on the other side of the like plinths of the Tiber island. My intention, in rebuilding this plinth, is to take more advantage of the sun dappled moments along the river's edge.

I've marked the beginning of this river event with a **wall**, perpendicular to the bridge, that borrows deep into the land to allow for ramping down to the platforms and onward to the water level. The wall indicates the primary entry into the piazza as it does in the Portico d'Ottavia site.

Superimposed and engraved into the slanted granite wall is the Ripa Giudea quote mentioned earlier — a **narration**. It appears in its original Italian and winds its way down the ramp system along with the person engaging in the architecture. As more of the quote is read — more of the horizon and openness of the site is unveiled.

SITE III - Cinque Scole

This site takes its name from its proximity to the former synagogue referred to as the Cinque Scole (Five temples) Synagogue. As

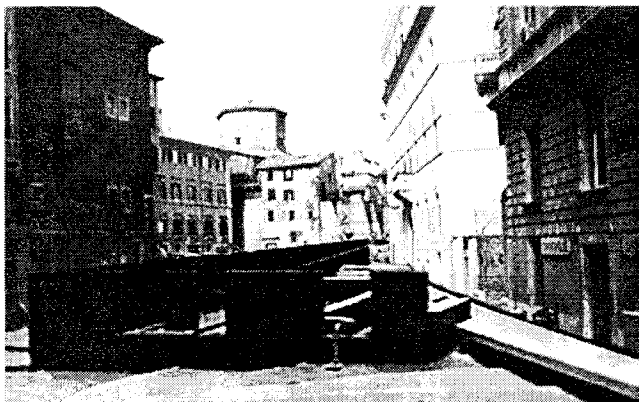


Fig. 7. Cinque Sciole showing playground and water folly through photomontage.

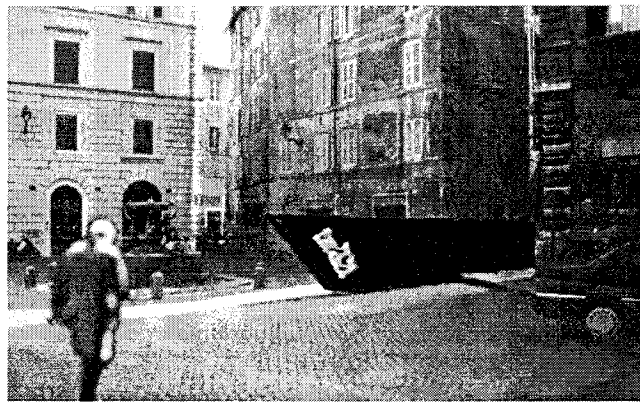


Fig. 9. Piazza Mattei showing wall marquee as entrance to Ghetto through photomontage.

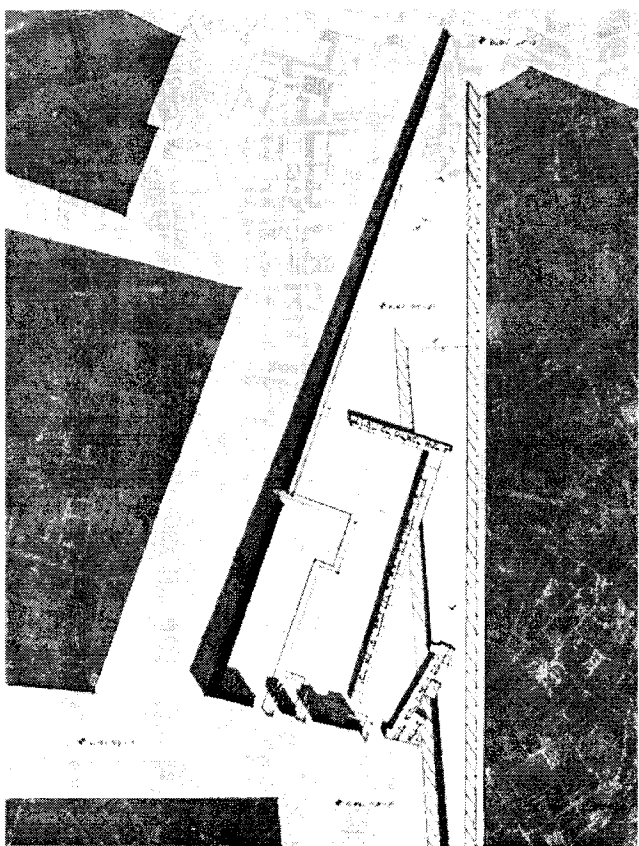


Fig. 8. Plan of Cinque Sciole site design.

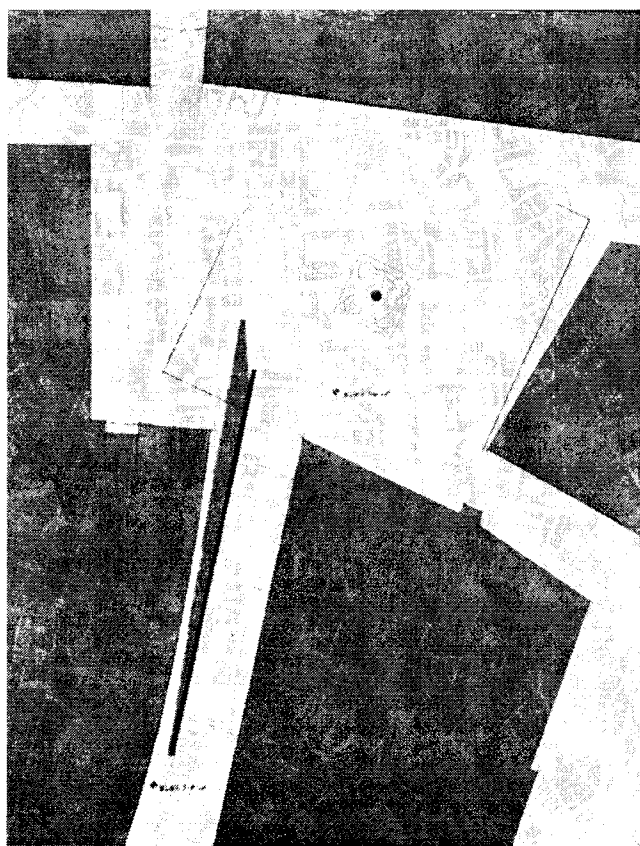


Fig. 10. Plan of Piazza Mattei site design.

life in the walled Ghetto became more restricted, Pope Pius IV in 1566, ordered the removal of the 5 synagogues that lay within the enclosing wall. The 5 synagogues, all representing a different school of Jewish practice (Roman, Lazian, Sicilian, Catalan, Castillian) were then consolidated into a single building just outside the walls.

Today this corner of the neighborhood is ailing. There is no retail along the street and therefore very little if any pedestrian traffic. It serves, primarily, as parking. Consequently it has fallen into a state of disrepair.

Enlivening this site is a priority and therefore the program I assigned it is a playground. I've inserted a platform in the footprint of the old Ghetto, prior to demolition. The triangular platform space, now a new piazza, sits slightly elevated from street level to protect the children from the danger of vehicles. It is defined on two sides

by a wall — a memory of the wall that once stood in the same place restricting the Jews. It is defined on the eastern side by a large 20th century apartment building.

A playground was appropriate as I noticed swarms of children playing in the streets, often threatened by traffic. Also designed was a water folly for their interactive playfulness of the children. The water element grew from the history of this site. Along this stretch of wall, from 1555 to 1848, was the only public fountain and clean water source in the entire Ghetto. It was supplied by the gravity fed Roman engineered water system that still feeds the city today.

Inscribed in the wall and seating surfaces throughout this site are Hebrew excerpts from the Ten Commandments alluding to and narrating the story of the original synagogue that was once located on this same piazza.

SITE IV - Piazza Mattei

This fourth and final site is the aberration of the four. It's located in a part of the Ghetto that was never altered or demolished at the hands of Papal rule. It was part of the Ghetto expansion that was built in 1824 and just outside the rectangular area of the larger Ghetto proper. It is the only remaining fragment of the original walled Ghetto — a wonderful example of the old neighborhood scale. It gets its name from the Mattei family, the large Catholic family that occupied a major part of the surrounding palaces.

Because of these unique conditions a different set of design responsibilities was observed. The other three sites were infill projects, (of course not in the typical sense since they were urban parks — voids). This site, however, did not need infill since there was no space in which to add so I decided opted for a minimal intervention.

I responded by inserting a **wall** into the piazza and down the middle of the street which leads into the heart of the Ghetto — providing a marquee for the neighborhood. An experiential aspect of the wall is that as one enters into the precinct of the Ghetto the space is compressed so as to exaggerate the experience of a 150 years ago when the gated threshold divided the open city from the cramped Ghetto conditions.

The wall again serves as an opportunity to use **narration**. In this case it does not appear in textual form, but rather, in graphic form. In 1824, just prior to the appropriation of this block for Ghetto expansion, the Pope commissioned a competition for the reorganization of the expansion. Many of the drawings from that time were archived and still exist today. The various measured drawings are inscribed into the wall where it juts out into the square providing an obvious entry marker.

The final design move was in dealing with the piazza itself. Near the center of the piazza stands a fountain — La Fontana delle Tartughe, partially sculpted by Bernini. It was commissioned for and dedicated to the Mattei family. I've inscribed a square into the piazza ground plane to make for a subtle grade change. The geometry of a square allows the fountain to become the central piece that it was meant to be. The grade change consists of a low curb which is enough to effectively isolate pedestrian traffic from vehicular traffic. Consequently, a pedestrian space is created on the western edge of the piazza.

CONCLUSION

Does this neighborhood intervention render the Jewish Ghetto a

more effective communal urban center? Does it respond to the heavy hand of modern day urban growth?

It's a start. More importantly it's a model from which cities can learn — a melding of La Città Vecchia and La Città Nuova at a scale more conducive to the individual and their interest in seeking out public interaction in an urban center today. Let us design cities in micro-pieces, at nodes independent of each other. We must allow the urban evolutionary process to re-root itself. And we, as designers, must resist the temptation to claim responsibility over large portions of cities.

Does this neighborhood intervention unearth the Ghetto of the past? Does it reinvigorate a struggling, but wonderful culture, facing the pressures of modern conformity. Does it bring forth the unique circumstance of the Roman Jews that grew in the face of Christendom? Perhaps the question should be...

Does architecture imbibe culture, and therefore can architectural intervention stimulate a latent culture?

I will venture to say that cultural identity is very tightly integrated with the space and environment that surrounds the ethnic members of any given community. It is the architecture that beholds much of the intangible cultural characteristics. The kind of culture that is palpable yet still difficult to define. The same cultural expression that emanates from eg:

The Royal Mosque in Isfahan, Iran

The townscape of Civita di Bagnoregio, Italy

The thatched roof tops of Fula Bula, Mali, West Africa

The Ganges winding through Benaras, India

The vastness of St. Peters, Rome, Italy

The humble nature of Jewish Ghetto, Rome, Italy (1555-1848)

Consequently, if and when an architecture is severed from that ethnic group part of what reveals the accompanying culture is also severed from that group, as witnessed with the Roman Jews. Once this occurs, can the culture be re-harnessed, re-stimulated by the insertion of contemporary architectural design?

Here in lies the rub...