



The Dark Side of Urban Development in Rome: Rione vs Borgata

A sociological study by Valerio Paolucci

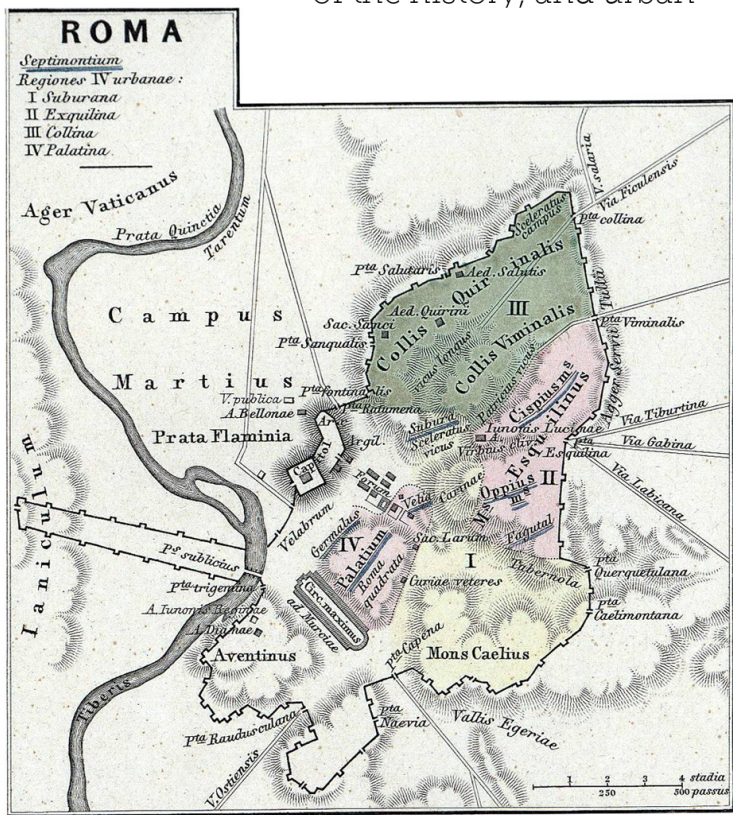
Intro

I have never been particularly proud of my cultural roots as long as I lived in Rome, but an interesting perspective switch occurred inside myself as soon as I moved across the ocean to start my new life in San Francisco. There for the first time in my life I could see myself through the eyes of people coming from different **cultures**, who ‘surprisingly’ praised my origins more than I did. This phenomenon reminds of the **looking-glass self metaphor**, a psychological concept of identity development created by American sociologist **Charles Cooley**, and triggered a new sense of pride, and a desire to dig into my up to now neglected cultural background, and therefore into the history of my birthplace.

Before I virtually escort you into two specific neighborhoods of Rome, to illustrate how the urban development of those areas has shaped the life of their inhabitants, let me tell you about some relevant aspects of the history, and urban

Rome’s history spans two and a half thousand years. It was the capital of the Roman Republic, considered to be the archetype of all Republics, as early as of 509 BC, and it is regarded as one of the cradles of Western Civilization. It was also the capital of the Roman Empire (1st century BC -7th century AD), of the Papal State (8th century-1870), and of the Kingdom of Italy (1871-1946), until the Italian Republic was constituted. It then became the capital of the country. Due to its long history the city has undergone many transformations, and in relation to its urban development, scholars speak of three different cities built one on top of the other: the Rome of the Emperors, the Rome of the Popes, and the “third” Rome, the capital of the Kingdom of Italy.

The process of industrialization can be blamed for the exponential growth of many European cities. It is tied to the decrease in quality of life, and the development of suburban sprawl. This was not the case in Rome, which remained a really low-populated, polycentric city, with a variety of social and commercial hubs, until the last few decades of the XIX century. Neighborhoods were not separated hierarchically, based on the social class of its dwellers or the kind of economic activities, which is a determining factor for the ‘success’ of an urban area, as I will explain below. The development of Rome was largely due to the boom of the tertiary sector, and consequent mass immigration that followed the appointment as capital of the Kingdom of Italy in 1871. A period of fast outward growth begun and the population doubled (from 226 thousand to a half million) in less than three decades. Since the economy was almost entirely based on the service sector and tourism, the quality of life in the center of Rome did not suffer because of the city’s sudden growth. Nowadays the population is a mere 3 millions, which qualifies Rome as a fairly small capital city.



Rione Monti



Rione is a term used since the Middle Ages to indicate the districts of Rome, according to the administrative divisions of that time. Today, 22 Rioni constitute the area circumscribed by the Aurelian Walls (271 AD-275 AD), known as the historical center of Rome. "Monti" means mountains in Italian, and the Rione is located on and around the hills that surrounded the Roman Forum, that was for centuries the center of Roman public life, and the Colosseum. Next to the Forum, covering a main chunk of the Rione was the *Suburra*, a crowded lower-class area notorious as a red-light district. Most of its inhabitants lived in 'insulae', tall apartment buildings with taverns on the ground floors located in the lower area of the district. Thanks to its central location, and the proximity to many historical and religious sites (like the *S. John Lateran Basilica*), Monti's inhabitants developed a strong identity and sense of belonging already in the Middle Ages. Monti has undergone many radical changes during the Kingdom of Italy and the Fascist regime; large streets that cut through the Rione were built to favor the traffic of cars, and others were built on the behest of *Benito Mussolini* to glorify the regime. Nevertheless, the very heart of Rione Monti, where the *Suburra* once stood, has preserved the same urban structure for centuries.

Four stories buildings overlook a network of small streets and alleys, the greatest majority of which has no sidewalks, and are still made of cobblestones. Plenty of small shops, art galleries, bars, hotels, and restaurants are located along the streets, onto which motorized traffic is off limits for people not living inside the Rione. Many buildings still do not have elevators, and it is common to see people using wicker baskets to send goods up and down to the old ladies who inhabit the upper floors. An amazing example of how positive **social interactions** among individuals can overcome structural barriers, and improve the quality of life for disadvantaged groups.

Every here and there the buildings open up to suggestive views of the ancient Forum, and of the Colosseum.



Rione Monti, via Panisperna

The core of the district is a small square with a fountain where a great variety of people can be found in the evenings. For the inhabitants of the Rione the small piazza is a place to gather and socialize, but it also attracts many people from other areas of the city, as well as tourists.

As suggested by the American urban planner **Kevin Lynch**, all these characteristics, added to the incredible amount of meaningful landmarks, help creating a positive **mental image** of the place in the mind of the people.



The **environmental determinism** view is often adopted to describe the negative effects that built environment has on behavior, but in the case of Monti it can help understanding the positive role that the environment plays in shaping the identity and behavior of the *monticiani* (dwellers of Rione Monti).

In a place that makes you feel connected with your cultural background, and that instigates a sense of **community**, the way this neighborhood does, the majority of the individuals tend to assume positive behaviors, both towards the environment and towards others. As a matter of fact only sporadic cases of violence have occurred in recent years, and deliberate street crime is completely inexistent.

Two other reasons contribute in making Rione Monti a safe and desirable place to live in : the presence of **mixed-use space**, and the positive effects that **gentrification** brought about in the last 60+ years.

Mixed use space is a concept introduced by American-Canadian writer and activist **Jane Jacobs**, best known for her book "*The death and Life of Great American Cities*" (1961).

It is the main argument of her theory concerning urban design and safety in public space, which she developed in response to the modernist approach to urban planning and architecture, mastered by the Swiss-French architect **Le Corbusier**.

Her theory of **social control** is based on the idea that it is within human nature to interact and observe each other's behavior.

If the neighborhood is friendly, the streets are safe and welcoming, the inhabitants will leave their houses easily, producing an abundance of local social interaction. The best way to prompt people to use the streets is to fill them with stores, bars, marketplaces, offices and so on. People who are not leaving their houses (the elderly and the extremely young) will be prompted to look outside, and social interaction will be continued. Social control will spontaneously be established with this pattern: as people feel observed and are observers they police each other into the socially acceptable behaviors, and discourage **deviancy**.

The term gentrification was coined in London during the 1960s to describe the renovation of declining lower-class neighborhoods. Rione Monti has never been in decline, but it is historically a lower-class neighborhood. Already in the XVI century people from higher **social strata** started to build their houses in the Rione, creating socio-economic diversity among its inhabitants. Sociological studies based on **empirical observations** have reported that socio-economic, and cultural **diversity** within a community generates tolerance, and therefore positively influences the quality of social interactions within the urban community. Today the term gentrification commonly refers to the **displacement** of the urban poor through urban renewal or revitalization.

The most invasive urban intervention that interested Rione Monti was the construction of *Via dei Fori Imperiali* (formerly via dell'Impero) on the behest of *Benito Mussolini* between 1931 and 1933. He wanted to create a physical and symbolic link between his office, located in *piazza Venezia*, and the seat of ancient Roman power in the forum, all the way to the Colosseum. In order to build the straight triumphal artery one of the most densely populated and oldest inhabited areas of Rome was systematically pulled down, and 746 of Rome's poorest families (about four thousands people) were sent to live in distant and isolated areas of the city.



Mrs. Jane Jacobs

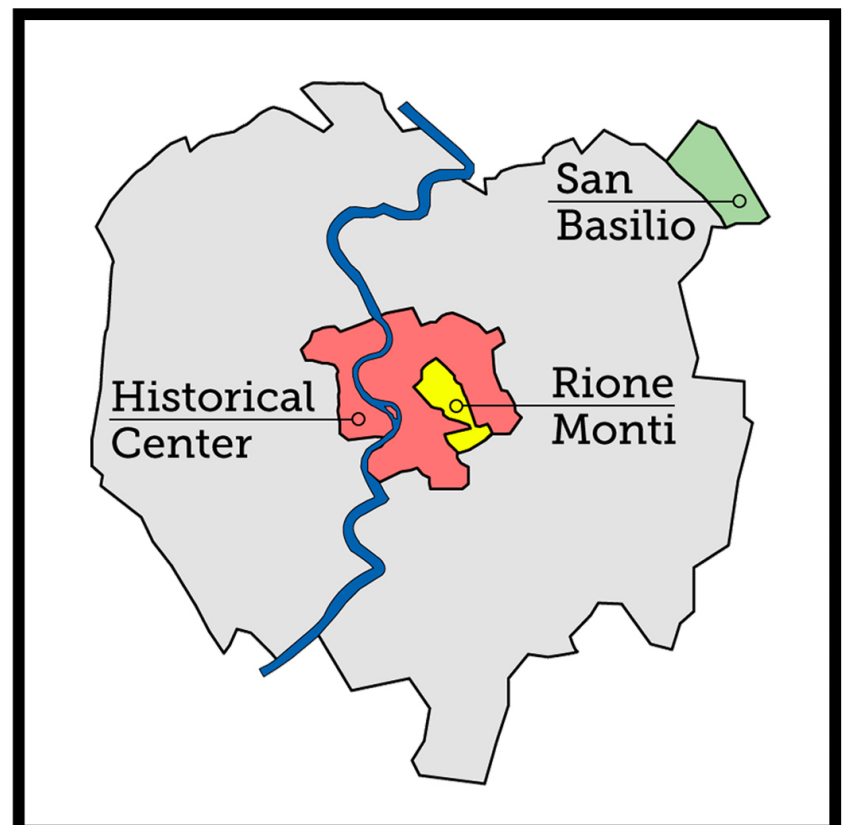


The area of Rione Monti that was destroyed in order to build *Via dei Fori Imperiali* (below)



It has to be noted that when these people were forced to move out of their houses the city had already grown past the Aurelian Walls, and a new set of neighborhoods had been build. They were called *quartieri* to distinguish them from the *rioni*, and were designed for the new working class who had found employment in the flourishing service sector..

The displaced population was relocated into a series of public houses in remote rural areas around the city. These new districts were called *borgate* since they differed from both *rioni* and *quartieri*.



San Basilio

Borgata San Basilio is one of the areas of Rome with the highest school dropout rate, where drug dealing and criminality are the means of survival for many people of various ages, as it is in the worst districts of Naples. Let's see how the sociological theories and concepts mentioned thus far apply to one of the infamous borgate of Rome.

In the last eighty years the city has kept growing into new districts that have filled the gap between the center of the city and the borgate, nevertheless the quality of life in San Basilio has not improved.

The urban structure of the borgata reminds that of many American suburban areas, where residential complexes are separated from commercial areas (zoning system). The apartment buildings, some of which were built in the forties under the Marshall Plan, implemented at the end of WWII, are all about ten stories high, made of impersonal grey concrete, and repeated identical throughout the neighborhood. In between the building there's plenty of open space and hundreds of trees were planted to compensate the ugliness of the houses. Pointless to say that the people who planned San Basilio failed in their intent to make it a decent place to live in.

The streets are usually empty and nobody dare sticking their heads out of the windows. Somebody even converted their balcony into more indoor living space, for outdoor life is not even taken into consideration by the ones who conduct an honest life. Those who have a job in the city drive away every morning and lock themselves back into their houses as soon as they are done. Many of those who don't have a job end up selling drugs in the streets.



Among the reasons that led to the development of organized criminality is that many of the people who were displaced from Rione Monti were craftsmen, and were not able to keep their jobs once they moved to San Basilio. The lack of socio-economic diversity, and the general disregard for the institutions favored the development of a **counterculture** that considers drug dealing an acceptable mean of economic support.

Last, but perhaps the most important factor, is the design of the urban environment.

The drug dealing takes in fact place in a specific part of San Basilio known as *squatted houses*, located in the furthest area of the borgata. This area can only be accessed through two streets, which makes it incredibly easy to control inbound and outbound traffic. Young adults, and even minors, are the only people who hang out in the streets between the squatted houses, because they get paid to signal the arrival of cops, or customers in the area. By the time patrols get there the dealers are gone, and the drug is hidden along the streets, making it hard or impossible to determine who owns it, or is responsible.



The squatted house, on the right, are only accesable throug two streets.



One of the two access roads of the squatted houses.

A basic **norm** of the ruling counterculture is that everyone mind their own business and do not interfere with what happen on the streets. This obviously ensures the lack of social control in the neighborhood. Even taking pictures is not recommended around the squatted houses, and can lead to troubles. Drug dealing is the only commercial activity in this part of the borgata (single use as opposed to mixed use). People who live there have to walk about ten minutes to reach the closest Cafe, or the only small market, and have to drive outside the neighborhood to buy decent groceries.

As a matter of fact an almost complete lack of social interactions among its inhabitants, due to the degradation of the urban environment, diffused sense of fear and contempt, and lack of places dedicated to socialization is evident in parts of the borgata like in the squatted houses zone. The average age of the dwellers is also crucial. Young couples regularly migrate out of the area due to the lack of housing availability, determining an increase of the average age of the population. The elders are obviously the group that most suffer the presence of the many structural conditions that make social interaction very difficult for them in the neighborhood.

To use the words of American author **James Kunstler**, strong opposer of **suburban sprawl**, and the modernist approach to urban planning, Borgata San Basilio qualify as *"a place not worth caring about"*.

Glossary

Culture: the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.

Looking glass- self metaphor: *Cooley's theory* proposes that people understand themselves and act according to how they imagine others see them and how others respond to them.

Symbolic interaction: refers to the patterns of communication, interpretation and adjustment between individuals. Both the verbal and nonverbal responses that a listener then delivers are similarly constructed in expectation of how the original speaker will react.

Environmental determinism: the influence of physical environment on human behaviors.

Community: a group of people having a religion, race, profession, or other particular characteristic in common, usually in the context of social values and responsibilities.

Deviance: the fact or state of departing from usual or accepted social standards

Social control: the patterns of pressure which a society exerts to maintain order and established rules

Empirical observation: analysis of phenomena based on experience and determined from experimental data, as opposed to theoretical.

Counterculture: a way of life and set of attitudes opposed to or at variance with the prevailing social norm.

Norm (social): an unwritten law that regulate society's behaviors