

Void of Power

Francesco Mancini, Tanja Glusac

Department of Architecture and Interior Architecture. Curtin University. Australia
E-mail: Francesco.Mancini@curtin.edu.au, T.glusac@curtin.edu.au

Abstract. *The history of built environment reflects the rise and fall of political systems, their conflicts, the social contradictions and ultimately, the state of being of a particular civic society over time. Former symbols of power, such as ancient monuments, palaces and churches still express today their symbolic, economic, cultural and political value which constituted in different ages the motivation for their being. Today these are replaced by new symbols of contemporary economic forces which through skyscrapers express global tendency and power movements. While physical edifices are easily recognizable as being expressive embodiment of power and political systems of their time, less visible, yet equally potent, are the shifts and voids in power relations. To fully comprehend the role of architecture in expressing and supporting power structures, it is important to question the concept of architecture as a mere act of presence (the construction) and consider instead the void and its complementary aspects: the absence, the erasure and the ideological need for demolition, as expressions of power. This paper therefore considers power within the parameters of void, which extend beyond the notion of “tabula rasa” that has characterized many urban transformations over the years. By considering the emblematic case of Via dell’ Impero (void), analyzing various ‘iconic’ works of architecture for their role in expressing power of institutions and individuals and adding to the recognisability of place (construction), and identifying dispersion as an underhanded way of exercising power, this paper proposes a more complex reading of urban transformations (dispersion of people via gentrification). It offers moments of reflection and a shift in research focus in terms of how the void is used today to express and support present power relations.*

Keywords: Fascism, Power, Rome, Urban Transformations, Void

Introduction

It’s a Sunday dawn in Rome. Cars and air are still, filled with a mist of an early morning. A lonely jogger cuts his way through Via dei Fori Imperiali, the vast road that was once known as Via dell’ Impero. 80 odd years earlier this same street was filled with crowds cheering ‘Duce!’ ... ‘Duce! ... Duce! ... (Figure 1).

The perception of the western city as a physical manifestation of power through landmarks and monuments dedicated to key religious, political, economic and/or military entities persisted well beyond the middle

ages and into the second half the 19th century until Baron von Hausmann’s redevelopment of Paris transformed the city and its image by means of adopting boulevards as an urban strategy aiding military defence against riots. Less importance, however, was attributed to the perception of the urban space and fabric¹ since the city was defined and identified by a number of monuments representative of power. For most part these were churches and monuments from the antiquity – expressions of power through the positive form, an example of which, in particular concerning Rome, is the area of Via dell’ Impero, the subject of this



Figure 1. Photo of Via dei Fori Imperiali today, source unknown.

urban analysis and a significant composition of monuments built over centuries.

In this paper, we propose that the idea of presence is not only related to physical presence, but also through the prolonged permanence over time with monuments being adapted and reused by new and emerging forms of power. This introduces the idea of a palimpsest focusing on integrated relationship between presence and absence constituted by a process of preservation and transformation (Manieri Elia 2001). Through such a process traditional styles were adapted to express contemporary qualities to be then overturned and reabsorbed into the realm of tradition eventually leading to their full or partial destruction as unfashionable relics of the past. In the light of this, we suggest that demolition and void are equally potent expressions of an act of power with both of them having the same capacity to also act as generating devices.

More specifically, in Fascist Italy as early as 1920's Gustavo Giovannoni (1931, 1995) proposed the strategy of *diradamento* or 'thinning out' of the existing urban fabric, as an acceptable compromise between pure urban preservation as advocated by John Ruskin

(1880, 1988) and necessity to move with times and progress. While Giovannoni's theory can be seen as positive within the context of urban sanitation and improved health and living conditions, its more sinister aspects see it being used by the Fascist movement to justify its urban interventions.² The implementation of Giovannoni's theory, supported by Piacentini's theory of urban demolitions, the so called *sventramenti*, led the office of High Commissar order tearing down a number of urban sites in Rome during the 1930s, projects that to this day have left a noticeable void - the Void of Power.

Geographical, morphological and symbolic context of Via dell' Impero

Via dell' Impero is located at the base of the northern side of Capitoline and Palatine Hill. It crosses Celium Hill on the eastern side where the Colosseum is located. The area is often referred as the area where the earliest settlement of Rome was established and which became 700 years later the area occupied by the expansion of the Republican Forum into

the Imperial Fora. Today Via dei Fori Imperiali³ connects the Colosseum (former site of Nero's Domus Aurea) with the Capitoline Hill and presents itself as an extension of Via dell Corso (former Via Lata) and Via Flaminia converging with Via Cristoforo Colombo down to the EUR.

The arrival of Via Lata to the Capitoline Hill was important because it was one of the major roads of ancient Rome leading directly to its administrative, political and economic centre. The symbolic importance of the name Capitoline Hill has often been cited to derive from the very word *capitolium*, which itself is derived from *caput* meaning head. The term capital also derived from the word *caput* meaning governing something – a thing from what everything else descends. While Capitoline Hill is a clear manifestation of a palimpsest, it is a completely antithetic counterpart to the monument that is the Colosseum. In fact, while the latter absorbed all the historic transformations without changing its morphological identity, the Capitoline Hill is a result of a superimposition of several monuments over time. The original Temple of Capitoline Jupiter for example is overlaid with a number of other monuments such as the Church of Santa Maria di Aracoeli erected over an Augustine altar where the first emperor of Rome received a prophecy of the coming of Christ, and thus celebrating the victory over the pagan religion by the Catholic Church (Benevolo 1992).

Virtually abandoned during the middle ages, the Capitoline Hill was revitalised by Michelangelo's 1539 design for Piazza and Palazzo di Campidoglio (Bacon 1974, Panella and Tugnoli 2015) commissioned by Pope Paul III for the purpose of welcoming French King Charles V. Following the 1861 unification of Italy and Rome becoming its capital in 1871⁴, other significant additions occurred between 1885 and 1911 when the monument to Vittorio Emanuele II, designed by Giuseppe Sacconi, was realised on the northern side of the hill. The convoluted, and at times grotesque, history of the monument's construction is symptomatic of the uncertainty of the new kingdom's image and with it of the absence of its real power (Brice 1986).

The above mentioned attempts to connect with the ancient Roman symbolism of power through built form were recognised by various statesmen throughout Rome's history, and they continued to some extent after the unification of Italy through the construction of the new ministerial palaces and, during the Fascist regime, the realization of railway stations, post offices, etc. Mussolini, rather than just follow the suit, decided to also implement the divergent strategy of 'productive demolition' (Bredekamp 2005)⁵ focusing on pure erasure, which led to the full destruction of the remnants of the old Fora⁶ as discussed in the following section.

Historical causes for Mussolini's rise to power and urban setting as a mediatic experience

Giovan Battista Nolli's map (1744) when compared to Antonio Tempesta's map of Rome (1593) describes the state of the city as substantially unchanged between 17th and the end of the 18th century. Starting in 1798, a large number of urban projects were discussed during the French occupation of the Roman Republic and launched after 1871 to elevate the urban structures of Rome to the level of European capitals such as Berlin⁷. The sum of all of these efforts is clearly visible in Rodolfo Lanciani's map (1900) whose surveys identify three overlaid layers of the city: the archaeological Imperial Rome, the present day Rome and any future developments proposed by the Kingdom of Italy.

The strategy of 'productive demolition' (Bredekamp 2005) started in Rome long before Mussolini took power. Following the examples of Hausmann's Paris (1853-1870) and Vienna Ringstraße (1857-1865), it is only at the turn of the 20th century that such an approach became an urban strategy for shaping the Italian capital merely through the erasure of the existing as initiated by King Umberto I of Savoye. This intent progressively became evident in a series of city planning schemes developed between 1873 and 1931⁸, indicating an overlay of the existing ancient

structures and proposals for their demolition and reshaping. These schemes, however, lack a systemic approach to the city development and generation of the new identity of the capital. Many of these transformations will in fact happen only partially as demonstrated by the void left next to the monument dedicated to Vittorio Emanuele II, the first King of Italy, built in 1911 for the 50th anniversary of the Italian unification. The opening of Corso Vittorio, Via Nazionale, Via Cavour and the incomplete demolitions of Piazza dell'Oro and Piazza della Moretta among others are further examples of this planned destruction, which adopted the eradication of the existing urban fabric. Far from reaching the synthesis of public space, built fabric and monuments these interventions were incapable of generating either a unified architectural style or an image for the new Rome as an expression of the House of Savoy legacy (Figure 2).

Mussolini built on the prior development strategies initiated by Umberto I taking

advantage of the lack of power and demonstrated political weakness of Vittorio Emanuele III⁹. Unlike the Italian monarchs, Il Duce saw in Rome a mediatic potential as a historical backdrop to assert the connection to Imperial Rome by staging military rallies. Specifically concerning Via dell' Impero, the opportunity for it to serve as a parade ground was provided by the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome. The works for the realization of Via dell' Impero, albeit not included in the city planning scheme yet to be approved by the government, started in 1930¹⁰ and were sped up and completed in 1932 when the road was inaugurated on the 28th of October celebrating the decennial of the Fascist regime (Figure 3). The urban void created by Via dell' Impero became an international stage set in 1934 when the recently appointed German Chancellor Adolf Hitler came to visit Rome. Looking at the plan it is clear that Mussolini's planners, the architect Marcello Piacentini and the archaeologist Antonio Muñoz, lacked vision

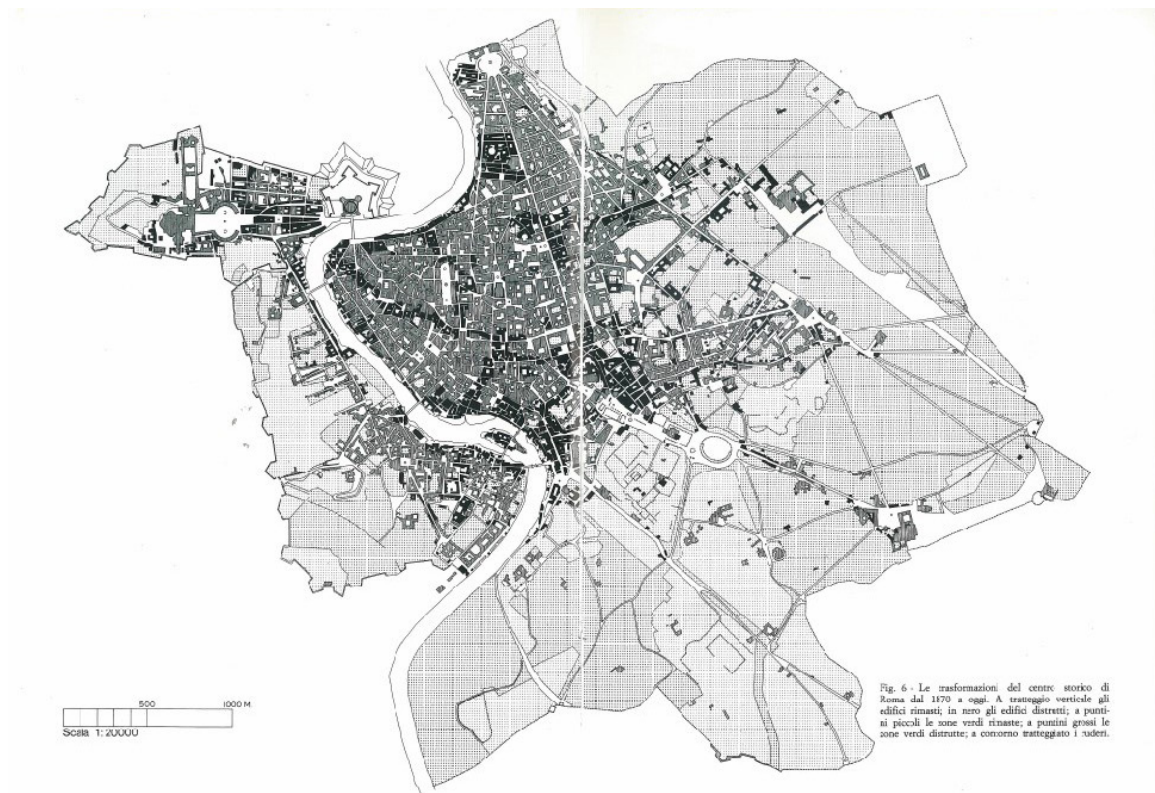


Figure 2. Demolitions of Historic Centre of Rome from 1870 to 1970 from Benevolo, 1992 p.12.



Figure 3. Fori imperiali from Roma ieri e oggi. https://www.romaierioggi.it/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/zona_archeologica.jpg

as to how this urban intervention was to impact the city life for the future. Initially, Mussolini was not interested in the antiquity, but being surrounded by examples demonstrative of the presence of power from the Imperial Rome, he saw a potential to use these as identifiable points of his power and a way to project the glory of the former onto the new empire. For this reason, the Fascist governorship commissioned Via dell' Impero without any detailed drawings as to where the project will go, or plans of scientific archaeological excavations of the area being completed. Thus the project proceeded under the direction of Corrado Ricci and Muñoz with no real urban consideration being given to the wider area of either the historical or contemporary Rome (Insolera 1993, 130).

Mussolini Urbanista¹¹

“Farete largo attorno l’Augusteo, al teatro Marcello, al Campidoglio, al Pantheon (...). I monumenti millenari della nostra storia devono giganteggiare nella necessaria solitudine”.¹²
Benito Mussolini

A further confirmation of their impetus will to destroy can be seen in Muñoz project for the ‘Liberation’ of the Mausoleum of Augustus,

which he started in 1934 in collaboration with the architect Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo, and in Marcello Piacentini’s demolition from 1936 of Borgo Vaticano, which made space for Via della Conciliazione to celebrate the Lateran Pacts.¹³ While Hausmann had at least a vision for a new Paris, in the case of Rome the only idea proposed by the archaeologists Ricci and Muñoz was to make space for the glorious ruined past to emerge silently triumphant in a metaphysical and imaginary ‘new Rome’.

Via dell’ Impero is conceived as a grand parade ground and a visual connection between Palazzo Venezia, the official residence of Mussolini, and the Colosseum. Mussolini’s main scope was to create a big void surrounded by archaeological ruins turning this site into a monumental mediatic stage set. He understood the power of cinema and its suitability as a medium and propaganda machine to instil the Fascist ideology into the masses. To achieve his perfect stage, Mussolini ordered the demolition of the Velia Hill, which for the large part of its existence was a consistent portion of the Celium Hill, one of the seven hills of Rome and its geographic core since the city’s origins. The numerous documentaries featuring the transformation of the eternal city by Istituto Luce, founded by Mussolini in 1924, further support the argument that for the Fascist regime, and Mussolini in particular, mediatic experience was the driving force behind the urban interventions in stead of elevating Rome to the level of development expect of a capital city in line with aforementioned Berlin, Paris or Vienna, and even less so to the grand dreams of a new world capital that Hitler had for Germania (new Berlin). If anything, the mediatic scope of the Via dell’ Impero can be compared to Albert Speer’s Zeppelin Field (1934) which equally served as a stage for mass rallies and performances designed to strengthen, in this instance Nazi myth and ideology (Figure 4).

Selecting the Colosseum as the culminating end of the Via dell’ Impero was a populist choice as it through its monumentality expressed the grand ambitions of the Fascist regime. Contrary to the popular belief, the Colosseum was not widely loved by Roman citizens, but its monumentality was embraced by the Fascist

leading to its selection as the key structure of the antiquity to serve as the propaganda piece and a mediatic setting projecting the glory of the new empire. This constitutes the paradigmatic shift from political power traditionally being expressed through architecture to the seductive performance of power on an architectural and urban stage to unite the masses behind them. In doing this, Mussolini started a process of deliberate erosion moving from the profound sense of place and deep experience connected to it to a superficial event where the social interaction is disassociated from the space and the values formerly embedded in it.

Conclusion

As a way of concluding, the significance of void as an urban form is essential. Having said that, they also can create a number of challenges that depending on time and resources available may create urban conditions difficult to resolve. Lessons that the historical examples such as Via dell' Impero for example teach us could not have been handled successfully with the tools and frameworks available to the city planners from the 1950s and 1960s. While on the one hand, authors such as Saverio Muratori and Gianfranco Caniggia contributed to a great deal of attention being given to presence of the historical urban fabric and building types and the importance of their preservation (Manieri Elia 2001), on the other, 'the value of differences, of alterations, and of the evolving contextual dynamics' (Manieri Elia 2001, 242) as elements of the authenticity of the built environment remain underexplored. This is due to an idea of preservation that became increasingly rigid over time ultimately failing to see the city as a cohesive organ, but as a series of isolated and selected monuments instead.

The rigidity of preservation was certainly a reaction to the Fascist regime and the void of decisional power it created, which progressively became a political excuse for postponing decision making regarding all the urban voids left behind after the war. Consequently Via dell' Impero and the old Fora transformed into an urban archipelago increasingly alienated

from the rest of Rome. The only ensuing change was the renaming of Mussolini's road into Via dei Fori Imperiali until in 1980 the then mayor of Rome, Luigi Petroselli, took a different approach to the problem of the re-signification of the historic public space versus its absolute preservation. Before his death in 1981 Petroselli approved the demolition of Via del Foro Romano, a suspended road that cut the Imperial Fora in two parts and launched the project of the archaeological zone building on Leonardo Benevolo's earlier proposal to remove Via dei Fori Imperiali and turn the recovered archaeological area into the Parco dell' Appia Antica. The closure of Via dei Fori Imperiali to traffic on Sundays was the first and the last step undertaken due to untimely death of Petroselli which put an end to any further planned interventions. Subsequently, the city council of Rome reapproved the return of the military to annually celebrate the foundation of the Italian Republic on the 2nd of June on Via dei Fori Imperiali thus allowing tanks to once again parade between the Basilica of Massenzio, the Forum of Augustus and the Colosseum.

The consequence of this disruption have not been captured by the post-war city planning schemes such as the one from the 1962 and its subsequent variations. It was not until the year 2000 that the new city planning scheme of Rome (Manieri 2001) introduced a shift in the cultural and theoretical frameworks, from object to context, from historical centre to historical city, and from static to dynamic strategies of preservation and transformation embracing the notion of void. The focus of this scheme is not only on buildings and infrastructures as has been the tradition up to that point, but is more wider in scope adopting systemic approach that is considering historical layers determining the identity of both build fabric (solid), public space (void) and infrastructure of any kind which can be seen as spaces in between (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Parade at Via dell'Impero. <https://comunitaolivettroma.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/16-la-topolino.jpg>

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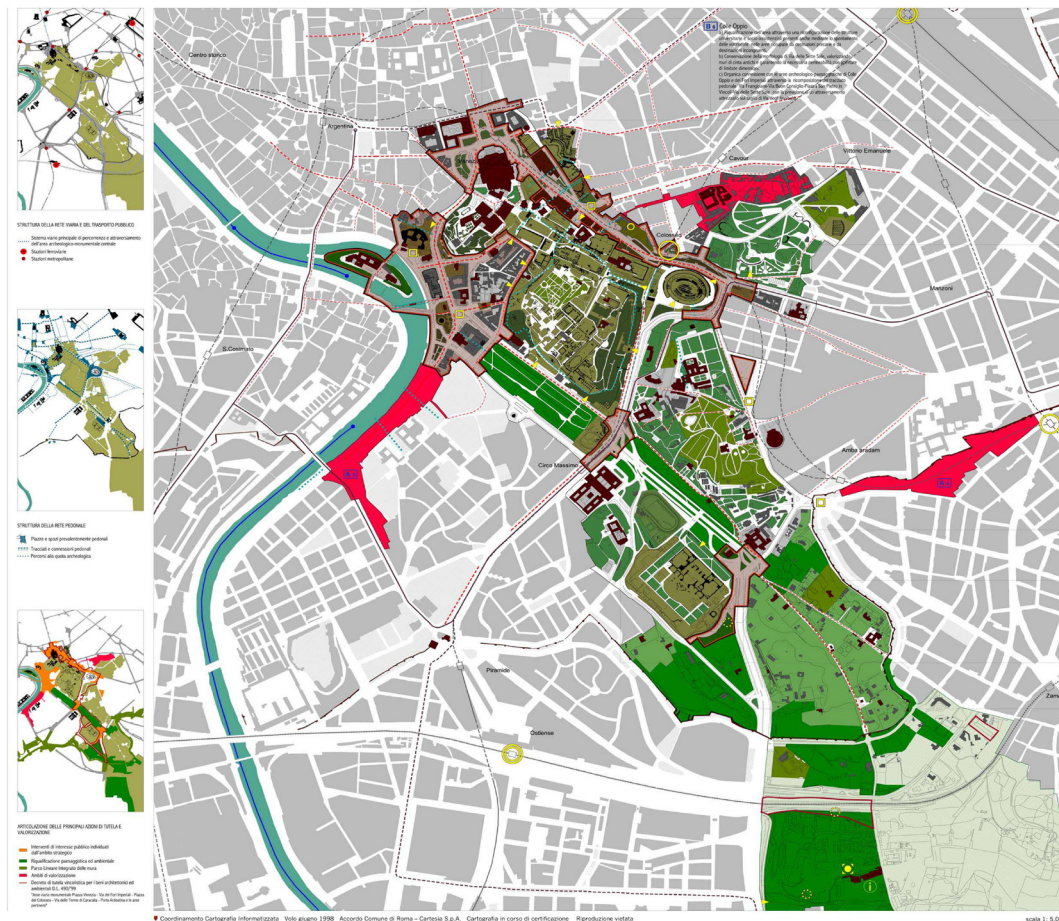


Figure 5. City planning Scheme of Rome the area of Via dei Fori imperiali proposed to be part of the archaeological park of Appia Antica. http://www.urbanistica.comune.roma.it/images/uo_urban/prg_adottato/i5_04.pdf

Notes

1 Since the establishment of the modern city, in the Renaissance and baroque age and prior to the French revolution, most of urban developments ideologically prioritized buildings, monuments and objects over the void space, taking advantage of the existing streetscapes and relegating the road infrastructure to a pure instrument for circulation. Pius II's unfinished plan for Pienza (1459-1462), Sixtus V's urban redevelopment of Rome (1585 – 1590), Julius II invention of Via Giulia and Paul III's creation of the trident in Campus Martius are clear examples of urban structures where the urban space is instrumental to connect physical new and existing landmarks. Even the long tradition of the Italian piazza owns its ideological value to the presence of a built counterpart, acting as a space for a proper contemplation of either the Cathedral or Palazzo (or both), which are the real protagonists expressing the local or the central power. It is only starting the XVII Century in France with Louis XIV that the square is elevated to a primary role in expressing bigness and power per se.

2 As a matter of fact, Mussolini, in his first speech held on the 31st of December 1925, openly launched an idea of liberating the monuments of Rome from centuries of decadence further stating that from Piazza Venezia one should see the Colosseum (Insolera 1993, 118).

3 The former Via dell' Impero was renamed Via dei Fori Imperiali in 1944 after the liberation of Rome by the allies.

4 Rome is conquered by the Bersaglieri on the 20th of September 1870, while the unification of Italy was declared nine years prior to the fall of Rome, in 1861, posing the problem of which relation was to be established between the new born Kingdom of Italy and the Church State (the so called *Questione Romana*).

5 Bredekamp (2005) proposes the principle of productive demolition to analyse the process of making St Peter's Basilica. An interesting parallel can be traced with Arnaldo Bruschi's book *Il San Pietro che non c'è* which focuses on the unbuilt proposals for the St Peter's Basilica which equally influenced the history of its making.

6 Imperial Fora was largely demolished and

compacted with dirt so that nothing of the old Fora remains underneath the road. Via dell' Impero is cutting right through the Fora.

7 Commenting on the outcome of this political project, Italo Insolera (1993, 331) builds on the statement concerning Rome by Charles de Brosses' (1739) 'This city, albeit big, does not look like a capital at all', concluding that 'This capital, albeit big, does not look like a city at all'.

8 The City planning schemes of 1873, 1883, 1909, its major amendment in 1925 and the final version approved in 1931 present a number of large areas marked for destruction two to three times bigger than the area marked for reconstruction. According to Benevolo (1992) and Insolera (1993) this was a clear strategy set in place to facilitate building speculation in the historic centre by means of a pact between the established power structures and the private capital.

9 The unification of Italy led to many problems. Firstly the question of the southern Italy which was not industrialized and whose gold reserves had immediately been transferred to the northern region of Italy over which the House of Savoy ruled to fix its economic deficit. Secondly, the persistence of the Catholic Church in maintaining its part of power in Rome as a traditional spiritual and stately ruler. And thirdly, the inability of the Savoy family to rule. These factors, among others, contributed to Vittorio Emanuele III effectively creating a void of power thus allowing Mussolini to come and take over.

10 In 1929 Piazza d'Aracoeli was demolished to create more space around the monument to Vittorio Emanuele II completely changing the perception of Michelangelo's Campidoglio. In 1930 a significant section of the Alessandrino quarter, including Via del Priorato, Via San Lorenzo, Via Alessandrina and many others, were demolished tearing down more than 5500 rooms and forcefully moving thousands of inhabitants from this low-income section of the city to Borgata San Basilio, which was at the outskirts of Rome and equivalent to a modern day slum.

11 Cederna, 1979

12 http://roma.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/16_maggio_22/mussolini-urbanista-no-uso-l-

architettura-soggiogare-197d3338-1f6a-11e6-8875-c5059801e8ea.shtml?refresh_ce-cp
13 Signed in 1929 by Mussolini and Pius XI to reconcile the Italian state and the Vatican after the incident of the Bridge of Porta Pia.

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