

# The search for realism : neorealist cinema and neorealist architecture in post-war italy

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## The Search for Realism: Neorealist Cinema and Neorealist Architecture in Post-War Italy

This essay focuses on the relationship between two components of Italian culture – cinema and architecture – both essential to portray the destiny of the country after the defeat in WWII. These components share an attitude, a narrative, a sentiment, and a common approach to reality, labeled neorealismo. Related to the idea of a „new realism“, neorealismo is commonly translated as „neorealism“.

The relationship cinema-architecture, so intrinsically controversial, took a very unique route in Italian culture toward the end of the 1940s.

This fact allows some questions to arise.

Was neorealist cinema pivotal to the insurgence of neorealist architecture? Was the language of neorealist cinema an operative tool for the birth of a new, modern Italian architecture, which would emerge from the ashes of Fascism and the crisis of the modern movement? If neorealist cinema became the metaphor of the rebirth of the new democratic Italian society, was the quest for continuity the output of an intrinsic contradiction?

When Ernesto N. Rogers became the editor of the renewed *Casabella*, in 1953, he subtly subtitled the magazine *continuità* - continuity. In his interpretation the issue of continuity was tied to history to the point that it could mark an ideological borderline to oppose the dramatic events of the most recent past.

I wish to anticipate some conclusions with regard to the possible interaction between neorealist cinema and postwar architecture in Italy.

Obviously, there is no influence in terms of derivative vocabulary, considering the opposite role played by the spectator as subject within the two domains. Architects borrowed the label from cinema because they felt that their practice should be tied to the same socio-political reality. They needed to recognize themselves as part of that climate of renewal, of *Risorgimento* of the late 1940s.

Vice versa, introducing the method of the oppositional frame from analytical structuralism some figures of neorealist cinema can be observed in the design of the housing projects of the early 1950s. The dialectic opposition of the topological scheme - open-closed, inside-outside, city streets-inside spaces, bourgeois housing-orphanage - to mention the few directly related to architecture, represents a mimetic procedure, which diminishes the distance between fiction and reality. These issues produce profound changes in the design process and in its formal result in building. Yet, the fact that there is no coincidence in time between neorealist cinema and neorealist architecture is one of the peculiarities of the period.

### Italy between post-war and peace

“Day broke, we too joined in the game / with the rags, the shoes and the faces we had.” This is the opening verse of a poem, which describes the new dawn longed by a society of the poor, of the delericts, of the hungry, of the jobless.

With these vivid images Rocco Scotellaro, the author of the poem, who was a writer and a prominent figure of the post-war syndicalism, depicts the conditions of the population of southern Italy at the end of the conflict. His poems provide a very immediate and striking introduction to the national-popular spirit of the neorealist era in Italian culture.

The offspring of Fascism and Resistance, neorealism gave a voice to the peasant revolts, to the struggle of the workers, to the misery of an under-privileged population fighting for survival in cities often devastated by the war and, in more general terms, to a moral commitment that had arisen in the fight for liberation.

The war that had so divided and shaken the country was finally over when northern Italy was liberated on April 25, 1945. The dramatic twenty months that elapsed between the declaration of the armistice (September 8, 1943) and the liberation left a profound mark on the long-awaited process of reconstruction.

During those twenty months Italy was split into two separated entities. It suffered not only because of the armed war; it also went through devastating internal conflicts. The anomaly was the existence of “two Italies” – one liberated, the other not – and the time gap that occurred between post-war and peace.

The fate of Naples, the great metropolis of the Mezzogiorno, during the fourteen months of Allied occupation (late September 1943 through December 1944) was emblematic of that difficult transition. It is no coincidence that Roberto Rossellini in his „Paisà“, the documentary film of 1946 on the advance of the Allies from Sicily to the Po delta made Naples the scenario of one of the most striking episodes.

The long lasting presence of the Allies also played a significant role in the social and cultural reconstruction of the country. The impact of the “American Dream“ created great expectations, which were often sadly disappointed. The rapidly changing customs and mentality of Italians came at the expenses of the traditional, fragile economy of Southern Italy. Contextually, the forced internal migration towards big cities led to a mutation of the social fabric of urban centers, whose pathologies generated phenomena, which were to have far-reaching effects on moral behaviour and relations between social classes.

This is the scenario in which Pier Paolo Pasolini set the proletarians of his early novels narrating the hard conditions of their urban existence: “Ragazzi di vita“ of 1955 (The Ragazzi) and “Una vita violenta“ of 1959 (A Violent Life). He returned to these subjects in “Accattone!“ (Beggar! released in English as Accattone!), his filmmaking debut of 1961.

In this context the reference made by Scotellaro to a new dawn lends a national echo to his words, which reflect, as in a collective invocation, the whole nation longing for a new Risorgimento.



Accattone! (1961)  
Pier Paolo Pasolini



## The spirit of neorealist cinema

The aura of Risorgimento was an imperative goal for neorealist film directors.

When was this cinematographic language first recognized? Who introduced the concept and why? Were the subjects and the situations described in neorealist movies instrumental to witness the existence of a neorealist poetry? Did the film directors encourage novelties in the cinematographic technique: sequences, cutting, mounting, language, etc.? Few examples will provide useful answers.

Even though the term “new realism“, introduced with reference to German post-expressionist literature, was being used in the very early 1930s, the need to represent the detailed and often impoverished reality of daily life found its legitimization only in the following decade.

The urge to speak in an anti-literary manner about the direct relationship between things and people was taken up by the first generation of neorealist film directors (Rossellini, De Sica, Camerini, De Sanctis) as a healthy appeal against rhetoric and the need to clear the field of any falsity.

In 1949, the film, which critics consider to be a manifesto of neorealism, Vittorio De Sica’s “The Bicycle Thief“, won the Oscar for the best foreign film. The event confirmed neorealism’s success, especially in the world of cinema. Two years earlier, in fact, the prize had been awarded to another De Sica film, likewise rooted in the contemporary situation: “Sciuscià“ (Shoeshine, 1946).

Neorealist cinema, with its international audience, soon became the emblem of the new free and democratic Italy.

The symbiosis between neorealist cinema and literature has been specifically relevant. Theoreticians of neorealism emphasized that literary texts would give films solid foundations. Luchino Visconti prepared the way with “La terra trema“ (1948), which was loosely based on “I Malavoglia“ by Giovanni Verga, the quintessential novel of Italian nineteenth-century realist literature. Shot in Sicily with local fishermen speaking dialect, the film displays a crude social neorealism, which expresses ordinary people willing to rebel.

When screenplays did not come from literary texts, they were entrusted to important writers. The most famous case was that of Cesare Zavattini, an author from Emilia-Romagna who, beginning in the 1930s, had published several books tinged with a richly humorous surrealism. From 1943 to 1951, Zavattini formed a fruitful partnership with De Sica, writing the screenplays for neorealist masterpieces like “Sciuscià“ and “Miracolo a Milano“, films in which the search for truth undergirded the writer’s slightly ironical taste for fables.

The cinematography – rigorously black and white, documentary-style – also forwarded the neorealist aim of projecting events directly. For instance, in the already mentioned “Paisà“ the episodes of allied patrols entering cities at night, with the commentary of an anonymous voice, played like a wartime newsreel.

Film was considered an instrument allowing a kind of primitive and original perception of the real; technique and style constructed a new aesthetic of reality.

This „reality effect“ was used to describe the difficult postwar life of ordinary people, especially that of children. Leaving the movie studios for the outdoors created a stronger appearance of truth, as well as a reduction in expense. The use of common folk rather than professional actors had a similar result. In what sounded almost like a provocation, language opened up; everyday speech was adopted, with its dialect, jargon, and foreign terms – especially Anglo-American ones, which had become part of common usage.



The Bicycle Thief (1948)  
Vittorio De Sica



The Bicycle Thief (1948)  
Vittorio De Sica



## The spirit of neorealist architecture

The call for concreteness and the desire to communicate became a leitmotiv among many professionals in the years between liberation and reconstruction. They enabled significant positions to be adopted in the field of architecture as well. Architects perceived both the immersion in daily life, which directors and writers were exalting, and the success that the neorealist aesthetic was achieving.

Though it was a somewhat restricted sector, architecture was also one of the liveliest arenas, and although the voice of architecture was but one of many on the Italian cultural scene, for once it was able to keep up with the other components of the new culture, introducing a kind of civil commitment into the practical business of planning and building housing and towns.

It is worth recalling that in its initial phases postwar reconstruction got an important boost from the organizations managing American aid for postwar Italy. The aid was not limited to financial help, but was accompanied by a true propaganda effort, presenting architecture and city planning as activities aimed at the creation of a democratic and pluralistic society.

In March 1945, the international program promoted by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration got under way.

In 1946 the United States Information Service gave significant financial support to the publication of the *Manuale dell'architetto*. The editorial committee included among others Pier Luigi Nervi, Bruno Zevi, and Mario Ridolfi, three protagonists in the story of neorealist architecture.

The manual contained a series of practical notions for architectural design in its different fields of application: from city planning to technical matters. Ridolfi played a central part in defining the manual's methodological and editorial criteria, which reflected his acquaintance with the German functionalist textbook tradition, but also his personal interest in craft techniques.

In 1948 the European Recovery Program also got started, promoted by the US Secretary of State, George C. Marshall.

The main site of neorealism's creation and consumption was Rome. Why Rome? Because reconstruction was first of all a political matter, and Italian politics were played out in the capital. Moreover, neorealism in film was forged in Rome, where Cinecittà was an important point of reference for the city's intellectuals. Most neorealist films were shot in Rome, usually with Rome as backdrop; the dialect used in these films, the expressive lingua franca favored by postwar cinema, was *romanesco*.

This fact bore a direct influence on the neorealist experiment in architecture.

But there were also reasons, which helped Roman architects, especially sensitive to historical themes and to a revisionism regarding the principles of the modern movement, to embrace neorealist idiom. Furthermore, both the recovery of ancient architectural beauties and the new appreciation of spontaneous architecture coincided in Rome with the search for regeneration of the post-fascist period.

The building of the Tiburtino quarter, along the ancient via Tiburtina, makes the comparison with the masterpieces of neorealist cinema quite plausible. Historians agree that neorealism in architecture had there its best known and most celebrated success.

Financially supported by the housing program launched by the "Fanfani plan" (1949), the Tiburtino quarter was planned and built between 1950 and 1955. The two directors of the project, Mario Ridolfi, who was most directly



Quartiere Ina-Casa  
Tiburtino, Rom (1950-1955)

engaged in the architectural design, and Ludovico Quaroni, mainly responsible for the urban planning, were both participants in the Association for Organic Architecture. They called on some younger colleagues to collaborate, and a healthy group of their students, recently graduated from the school of architecture in Rome.

The adjective “neorealist”, when referred to architecture, did not indicate a style and much less a codified linguistic repertory. It rather connoted a vigorously anti-intellectual attitude, opposed to the monumental and academic approach of Fascist years, and open to architecture for daily life, modelled directly on the material and psychological needs of the common people who were going to use it. Indeed neorealism meant vernacular architecture, rural and bucolic.

It is worth recalling that in the 1930s Italian culture did already pay attention to rural issues, to Mediterranean architecture, and to regional building traditions. Giuseppe Pagano, the architect and main editor of *Casabella* referred to them in his passionate study of rural Italian architecture. He interpreted the spontaneous (popular) tradition in architecture as a potential alternative to a neoclassical decorative style as well as to the mechanical quality of functionalism.

But the postwar return to the origin of peasant culture generated a new world of expression, where architects worked to use their narrative talents to rewrite reality.

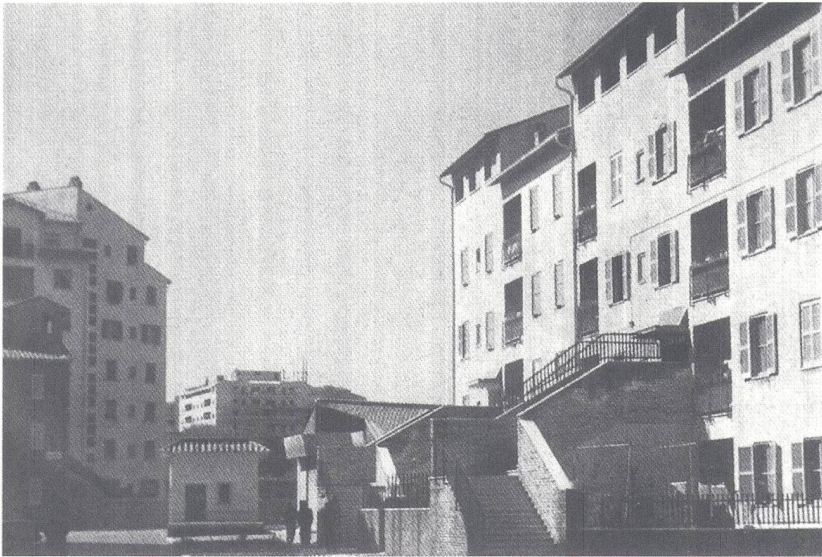
At Tiburtino the designers intended to build a “village”, an urban unit that was neither periphery nor downtown, but that offered an alternative to these. All buildings show composite forms generated by compenetration and fragmentation, which annulled straight lines and right angles. Flat planes are made three-dimensional by the irregular addition of loggias, protruding balconies, and attics enclosed by walls of perforated bricks; the roofs are always inclined, tile-covered, built at different heights.

The unitary quality of the planning melts in the apparently casual compositional links, in the evocation of an imaginary historical stratification. “There were six or seven buildings, twisted and askew, with rows of round little windows, painted deep pink”, wrote Pasolini in his novel *Una vita violenta*, “with doors, which were up five or six steps and zig-zag railings joining them”. The result was a heterodox bazaar of fantasy solutions, which remained the trademark of the quarter. The houses even seemed exotic, as another ironical description of Pasolini shows: “People began to call the place Alice in Wonderland, Magic Village, or Jerusalem: and everybody laughed about it, but the people who lived in the poor neighborhoods around there began to think: ‘Ah, finally they’ll give a harem to me too!’”.

## Epilogue

In the course of the reconstruction Italian institutions had been turned upside down, events had overwhelmed the political and social situation. New prospects and opportunities appeared to open up for architects and urban planners, though the world of the architectural profession was equally riven by tensions





Quartiere Ina-Casa  
Tiburtino, Rom (1950-1955)

deriving from designers' political and social commitment. Reformist programs were at odds with poetic options.

Once again it was the cinema, which signalled the depth of those changes, as it moved away from neorealist narration. On the one hand, Federico Fellini began his rise. He did not explicitly deny his debt to the neorealist tradition, but in the first of his films with a wide audience, "La strada" (1954, another Oscar for the Italian cinema), he introduced mythical figures in place of real people in a real situation.

On the other hand, there was the new "commedia all'italiana" of directors like Comencini and Monicelli. A hybrid between neorealism and vaudeville humor, it abandoned the social commitment of post-resistance films, and set out showing a cross-section of ideals and customs of an Italy which remained a country of ordinary mortals, people who used any means available for personal and economic advancement.

Neorealist architecture followed an analogous parabola. In the middle of the 1950s, many new housing districts made neorealist style widely known. The national-popular experiment ran up against the limits of its vernacular Esperanto; neorealism's codification from an experiment into an official architectural language was not to happen.

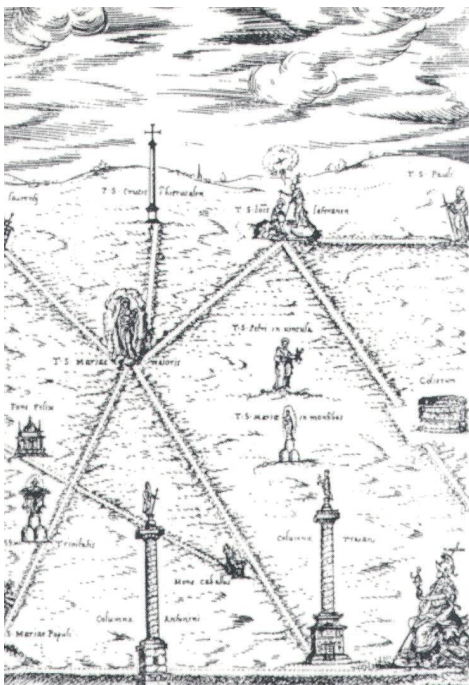
At the end of the decade Carlo Melograni, who was among the young at the Tiburtino, returned to the subject of neorealism's limits: "The so-called neorealist architecture thus had two faces. On one side it showed that it wanted to look directly at problems previously ignored ... On the other, it liquidated preceding experiences too hastily; trusting the empirical approach to find solutions case by case, it was not able to elaborate, on the basis of those solutions, elements of a new language. It ran the risk of transforming popular traditions into folkloristic curiosities, opening the field to a renewed academicism."

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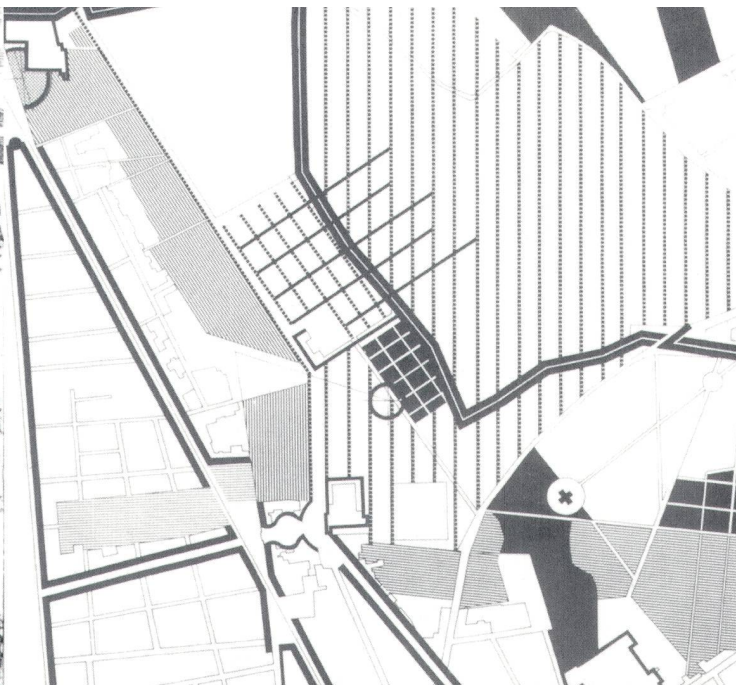
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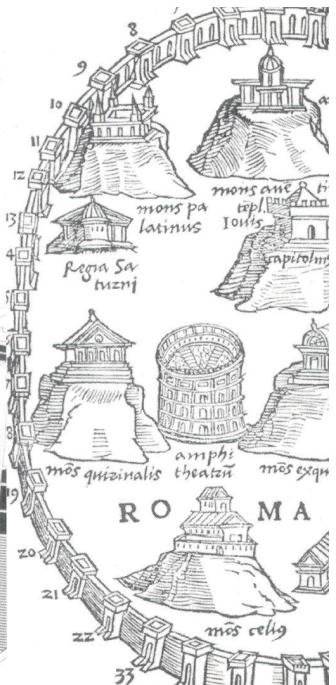




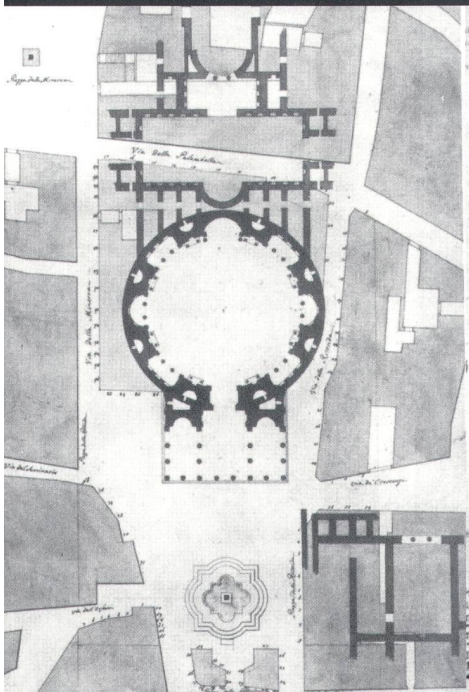
Roma von Domenico Fontana, 1588



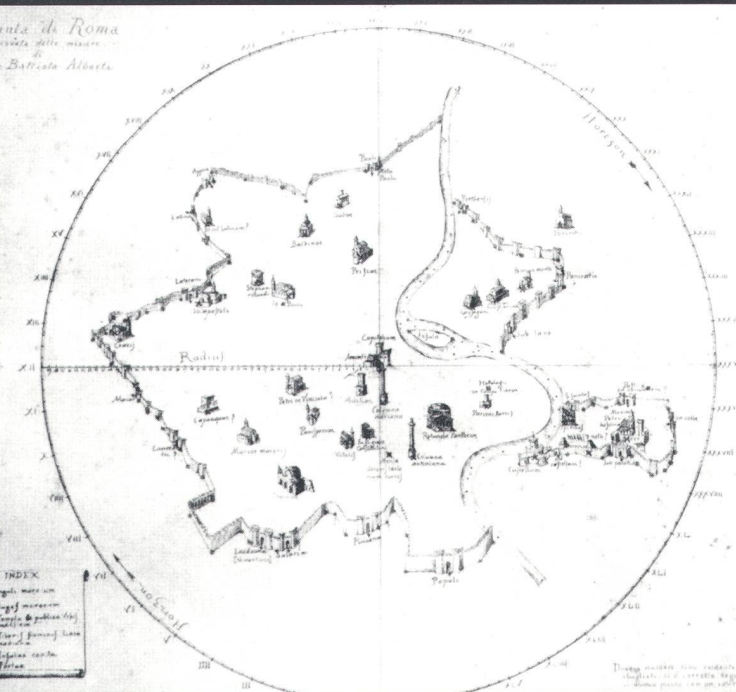
Roma interrotta nach Costantino Dardi, 1978



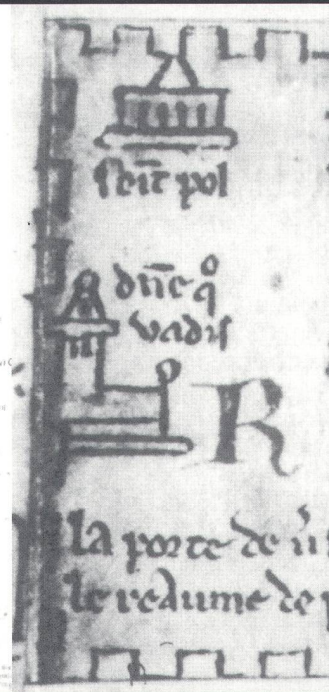
Roma als Hügellandschaft, 1447



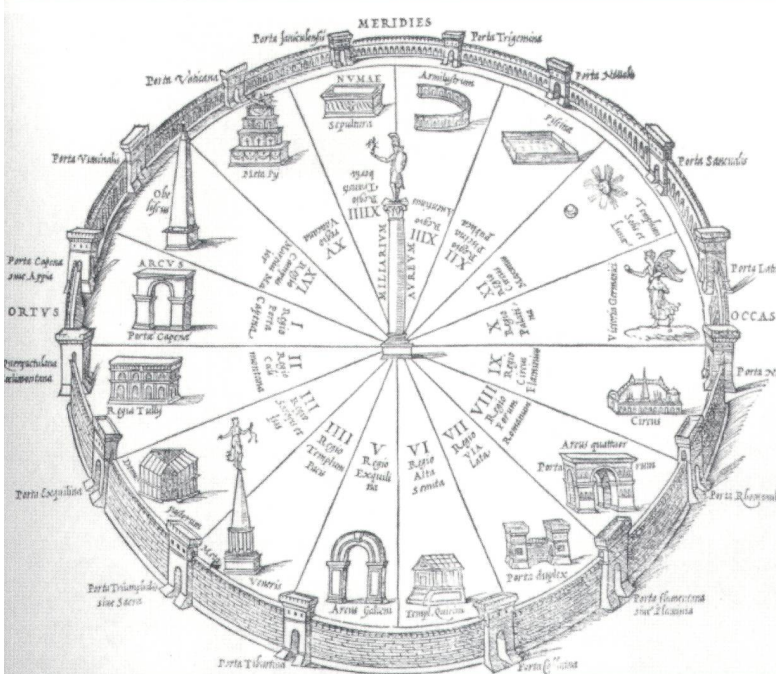
Roma nach Giuseppe Valadier, ca. 1800



Roma nach Leon Battista Alberti, 1884



Roma quadrata, 1250



Roma caput mundi, ca. 1450

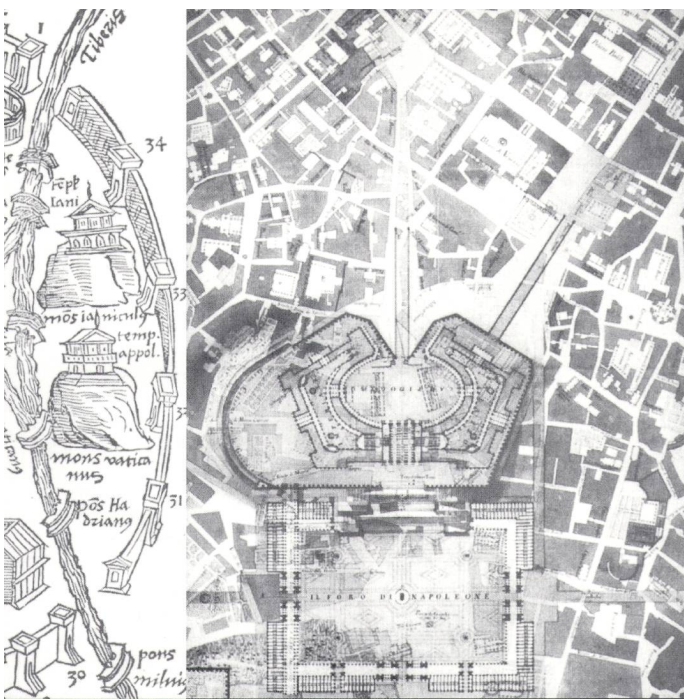
## 24 x Rom als Idee

Die Darstellungen sind Projekte

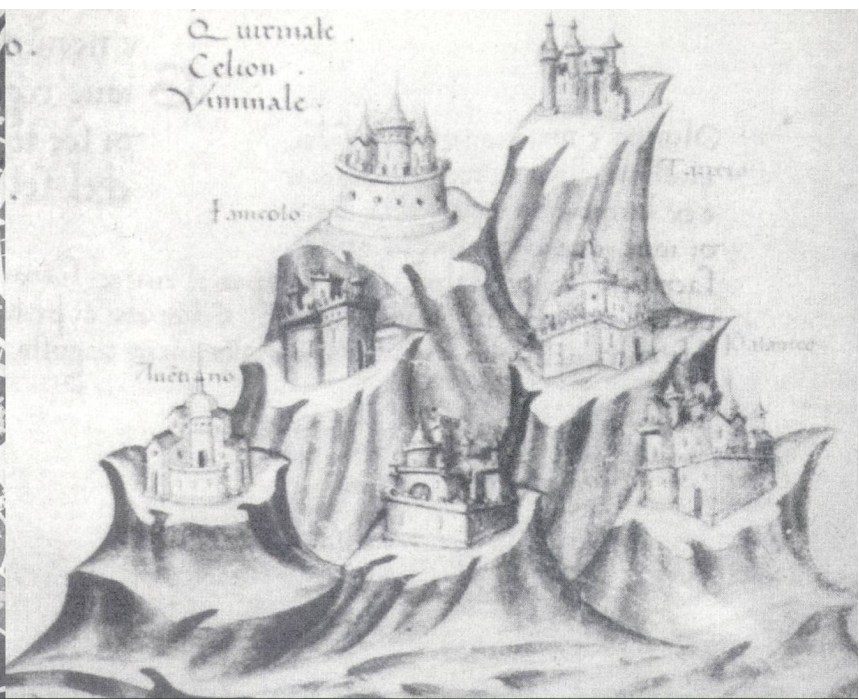
alberto alessi

Die Darstellung ist immer vor oder nach dem dargestellten Objekt gemacht, nie gleichzeitig.  
Eine Architektur, eine Stadt darzustellen, heisst diese zu modifizieren: man fragt sich was wahr ist und was nicht, welche Zeit/Vision eines Gebäudes man evident machen sollte. Die Frage ist nicht die Darstellungstechnik, sondern der Blickpunkt aus welchem etwas dargestellt wird. In der Architekturdarstellung, und dessen Räumlichkeit, bleibt das Problem der Übersetzung der zeitlichen Erfahrung immer ungelöst. Wie das Vorher und Nachher einer Raumerfahrung darstellen? Jeder Versuch bleibt partiell, persönlich und zweidimensional. In der Wirklichkeit ist Architektur ein konkretes Ding, in einen konkreten Ort platziert, für jeden da; in der Darstellung mischen sich Objekt und persönliches Phänomen und werden eine Gesamtheit.  
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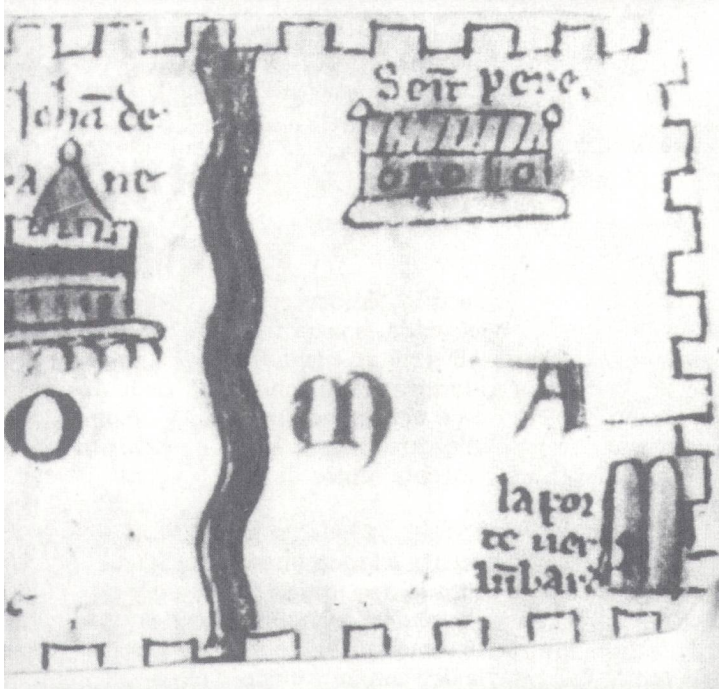




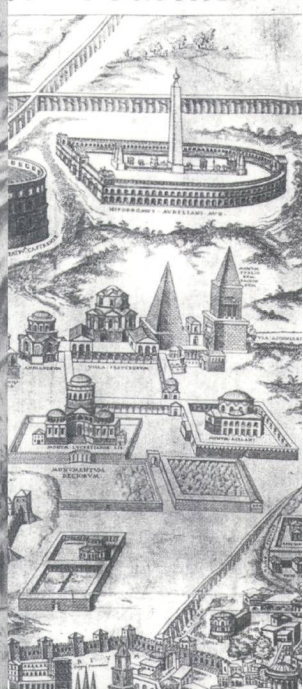
## Roma für Napoleon, 1810



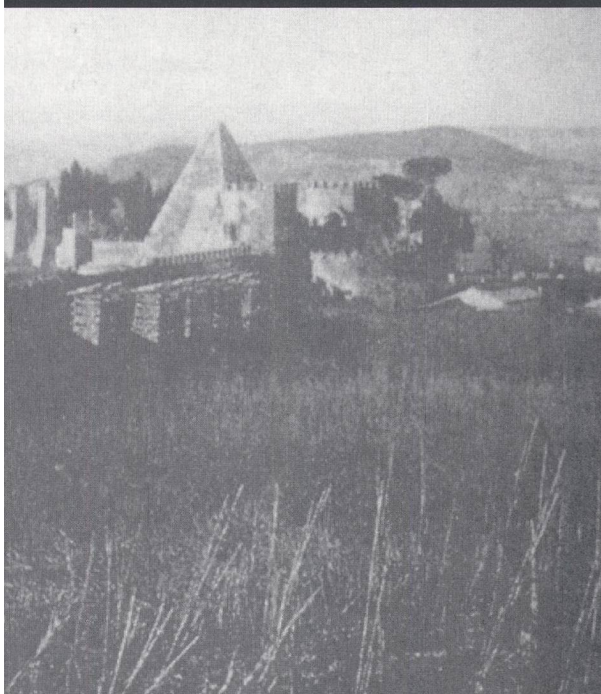
### Roma als Hügellandschaft, 1447



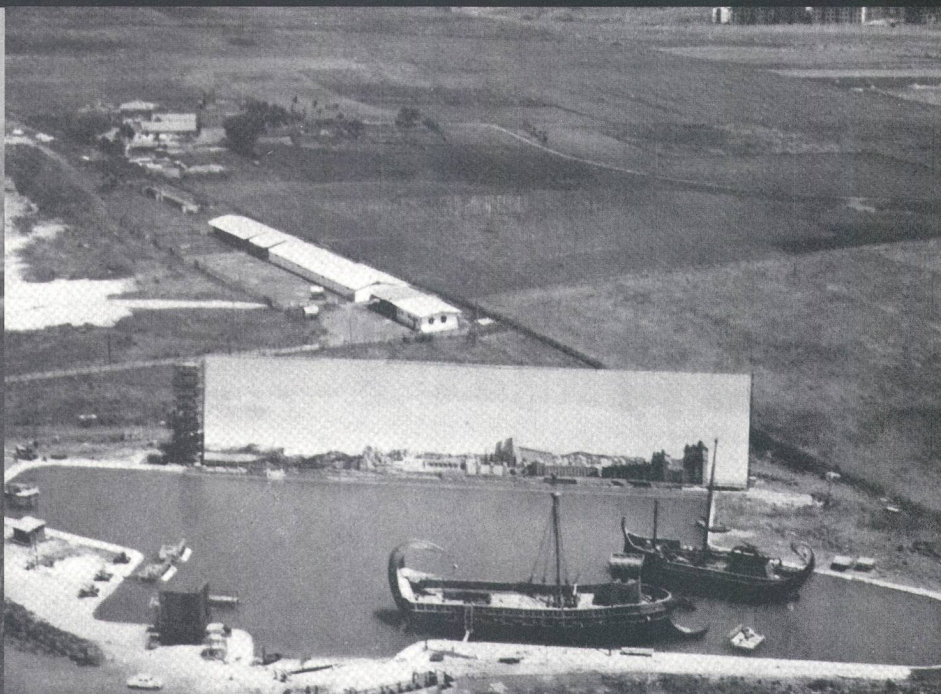
Roma als Frau, 1447



Roma nach Ligorio, 1553

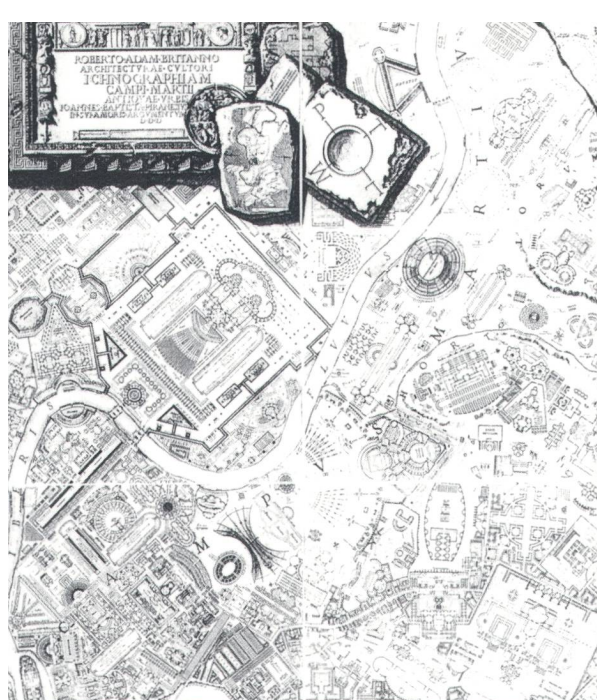


Roma und ihre Landschaft, Ende XIX Jhd.

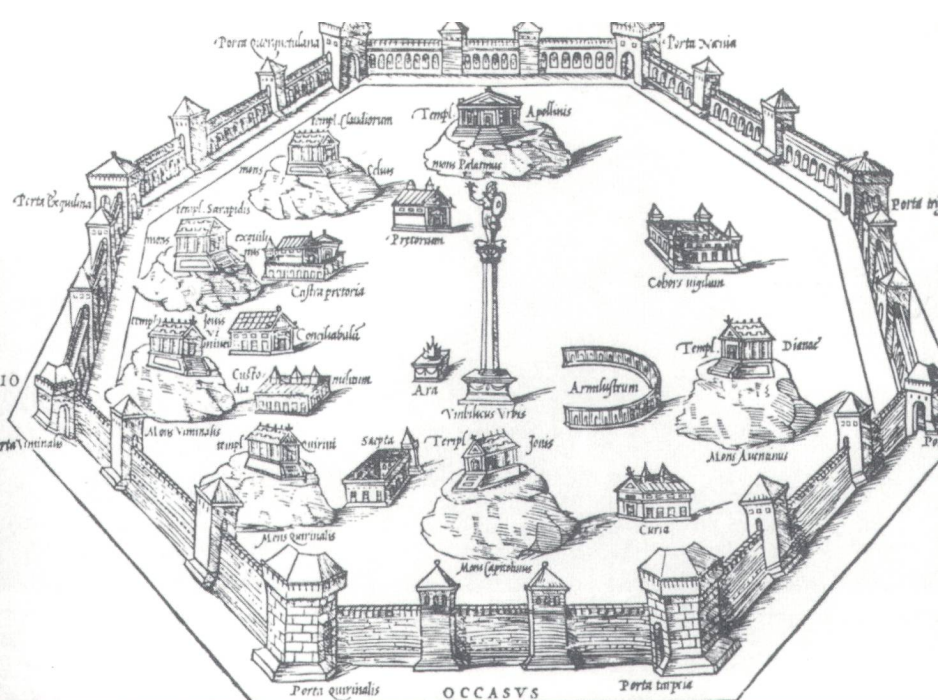


## Roma cinecittà, 1960





Roma Campo Marzio nach GiovanBattista Piranesi, 1762



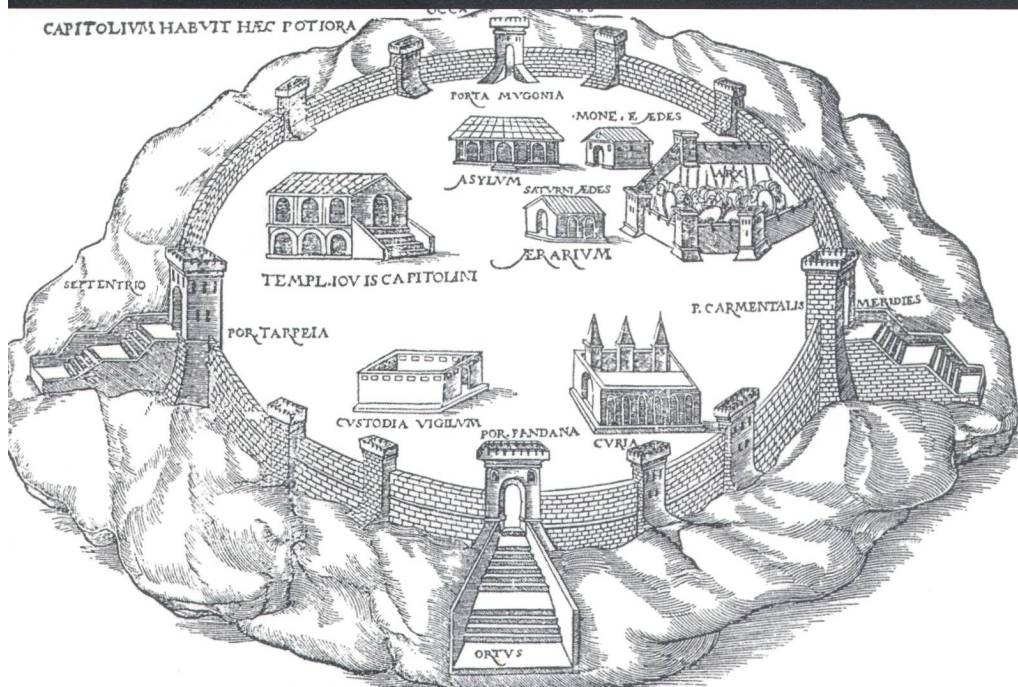
Roma ottagon, ca. 1450



Roma und die Spina di Borgo, XX Jhd.



Roma nach Massaio, 1469



Roma rotonda, ca. 1450

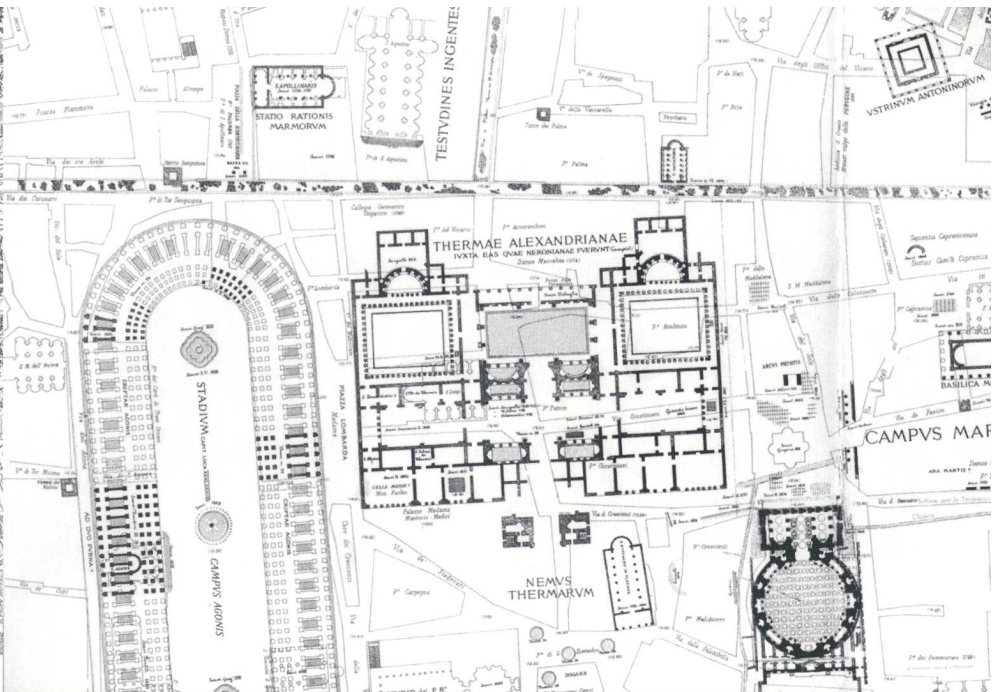


Roma als Postcard, XX Jhd.

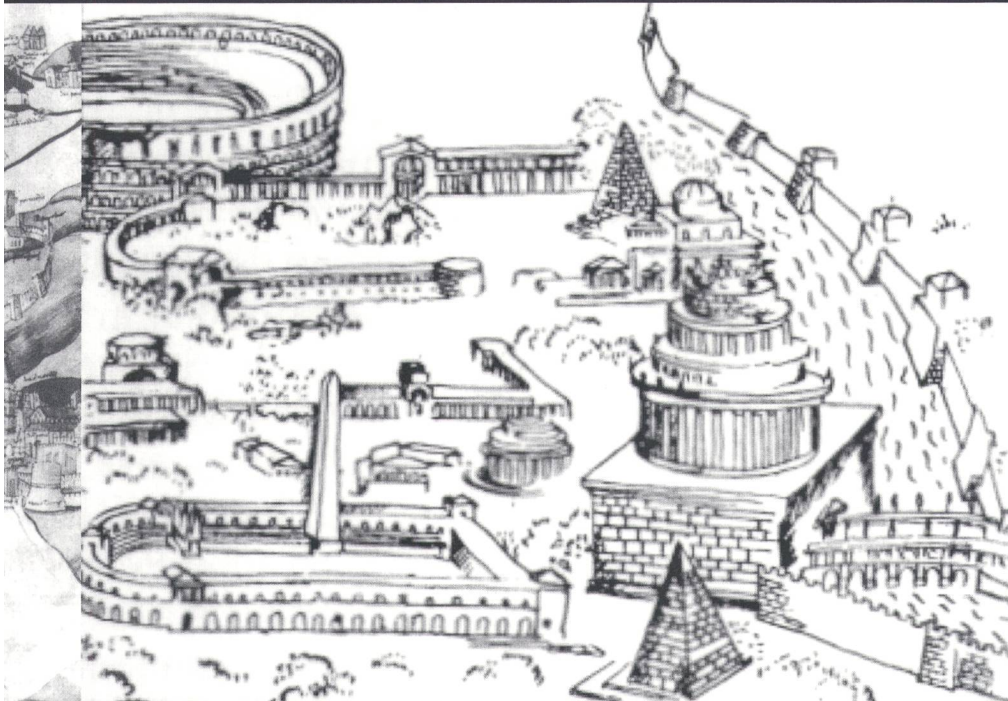




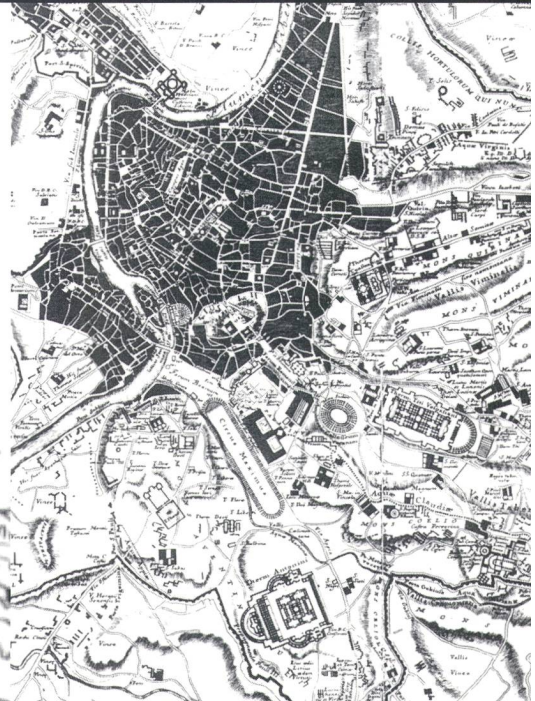
• del distretto di Roma secondo le osservazioni  
di William Gell • del professor Antonio Nibby



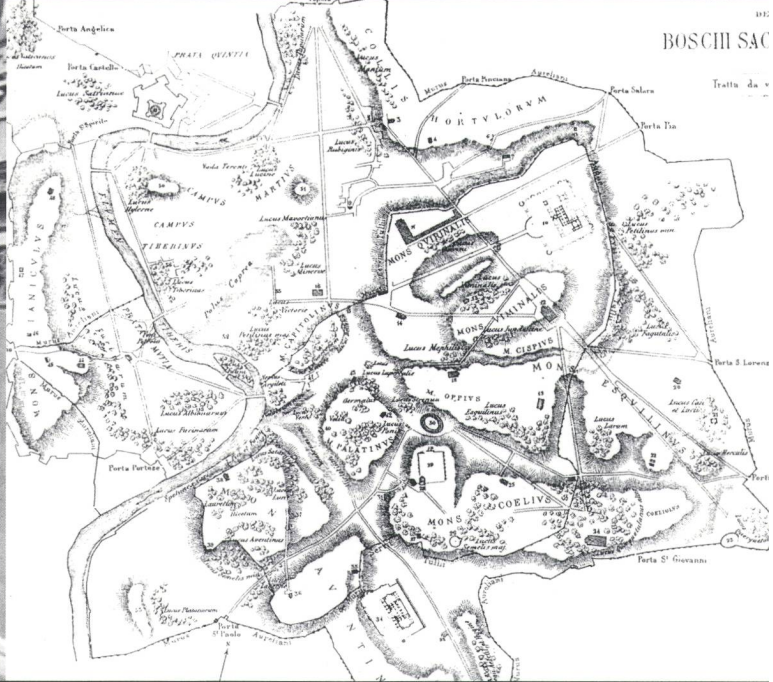
Roma und ihre Landschaft, mitte XIX Jhd. Roma nach Rodolfo Lanciani, 1901



Roma nach Le Corbusier, 1923

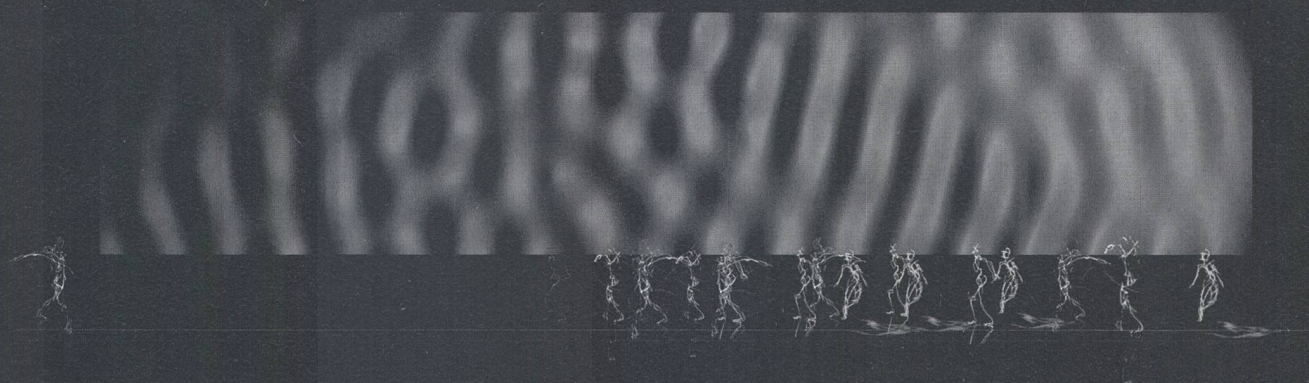


Roma nach Nolli, 1748



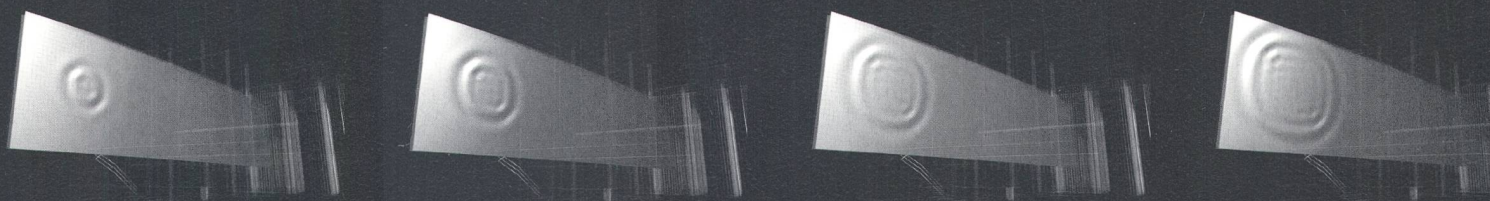
Roma und ihre heiligen Wäelder, ende XIX Jhd





Aegis Hyposurface© -The idea of the project is the creation of a dynamically responsive surface that reconfigures real-time according to input from a variety of electronic inputs (movement, sound, etc). As such it can be thought of as a three-dimensional screen (the world's first), but one that can be attuned to its surrounding environment, creating the potential of a physically responsive architecture. It may also be used to display text or images, responding rapidly enough to be able to map the movements and sounds of people. As such it can function alternately as a tactile mirror and an information surface, the architecture coming into being 'as event' only through interaction with people.

Mark Goulthorpe, DECOI architects, Paris



Grafiken der AEGIS HYPOSURFACE©, DECOI architects, Paris