Rome is thought of as a city for walking. In the coolness of a summer evening, Romans and visitors alike promenade in the great parks and gardens that surround the city. Others "lare la passagista" in the historic center, along bustling streets lined with centuries' accumulation of churches, palazzi, and shops. In recent years, Rome also calls up images of air thick with pollution, streets without sidewalks where the omnipresent automobiles vie with pedestrians for right-of-way, and young thieves pass dangerously close on speeding motor scooters. With relief, the wanderer reaches the open piazzas, to seek refreshment in umbrella-shaded cafes, to contemplate the fountains and monuments of Rome, or to enjoy the verdant refuge of a small garden.

Ten feet beneath the modern streets lie the remains of Republican and Imperial Rome. In antiquity, too, it was a city for walking, and the pedestrian was well accommodated. By the 1st century A.D., great parks or Horti surrounded the city, and even in town it was possible to stroll along sidewalks protected from the sun, rain, and traffic by covered porticoes (Fig. 2). These led to large piazzas (piazze), enclosed by covered arcades (quadriportici), that were designed as great public gardens and adorned with fountains, stately, and shade trees. According to the ancient poet Martial (Epigrams 2.14.10), one could walk through much of the city without ever leaving the comfort of these passageways (Lanciani 1925).

The most extensive network of interconnecting porticoes lay in the area known as antiquity as the Campus Martius (The Field of Mars), the modern Campo Marzio. This area of Rome has been continuously occupied since antiquity, making it difficult for archaeologists to excavate the remains of these great ancient public works, but evidence for their design and appearance is surprisingly well preserved in two unlikely sources. The first is a plan of the city of Rome drafted on marble during the reign of Septimius Severus in the early 3rd century A.D., now preserved in the British Museum. The second is a collection of detailed accounts by various Roman writers, such as Frontinus, who describes the Portico of Octavius and the Portico of Nerva.
early 3rd century A.D. Fragments of
this plan, commonly referred to as
the Forum Urbs Romae, preserve
the designs of at least seven public
parks and promenades built between
the 1st century B.C. and the 3rd
century A.D.

The second source of evidence is
the city itself. To the modern pedes-
trian the streets and building facades
are full of clues: reused columns and
architectural decoration (Fig. 5),
fragments of statuary, and here and
there the remains of ancient walls
and roads visible in the basements of
hotels, apartments, and restaurants.

From the air, the relationship of the
modern city to the ancient one is
even clearer. Because later buildings
often utilized the foundations of
earlier structures, the layout of the
modern houses and streets preserves
the form of the ancient city. This
relationship is particularly discern-
able in the ground floor plans of
buildings in the Campus Martius
area, where the manner in which the
medieval city rests upon the remains
of Imperial Rome is astonishingly
clear. Moreover, recent work by
Italian archaeologists has shown that
specific architectural features de-
picted on the Severan marble plan,
which had been drawn to scale quite
accurately, can be recognized in the
pattern of the modern urban fabric
(Quilici 1963). Thus it is possible to
ascertain a considerable amount
about the topography of the ancient
city without recourse to the destruc-
tion and expense of archaeological
evacuation.

The grand portico, built in the
Campus Martius by the successful
general and consul Pompey the
Great (C. Pompeius Magnus), was
one of the most popular promenades
and gardens of Rome. Constructed
between 62 and 52 B.C., this portico
was part of a larger complex that
included the first free-standing,
permanent stone theater in Rome, the
senate house (curia) in which Julius
Caesar was later assassinated, and
numerous porticoes with decorative
themes celebrating Rome's victories
in the East. The central area of the
portico was a public garden, ren-
owned for its lavish fountains, cur-
ated collections of statuary, and
shady avenues of plane trees.

Today, Pompey's complex under-
lies an entire neighborhood exten-
sing from the open market and
cafes of the Campo del Ponte (Fig. 7)
to the Largo Argentina, with the
ruins of four early Republican tem-

elopes visible before the modern street
level (Fig. 1). The location and
shape of the theater are still clearly
discernable in the curving walls of
the palazzi (apartment buildings)
along the Via di Grotta Fina and the
Via del Biscione (Fig. 4), and local
restaurants afford diners the oppor-
tunity to sit in the exact substi-
tutes of the great theater. The por-
ticoes and gardens are more difficult
to detect. Although several modern
streets preserve the alignments of
the ancient porticoes, the gardens
themselves lie buried beneath the
buildings of the modern city.

The Severan marble plan is our
primary evidence for the basic lay-
out of the theater, porticoes, and
gardens (Fig. 6a). However, while
the theater and porticoes are clearly
drawn, the gardens are depicted
with symbols so enigmatic that schol-
ars have been unable to arrive at
any conclusive interpretation of
their meaning. Furthermore, a number
of the fragments first discovered in
1962 were lost (others were reused
in the garden walls of the Villa Far-
nesina). Although the marble plan
drew to scale, only Remains
sketches of the missing seg-
ments remain and these were not
drawn to scale. Restoration of the
appearance of the entire complex is
therefore complicated, particularly
in the case of the theater where the
largest number of plan fragments
have been lost.

The Theater

Pompey the Great had returned in
62 B.C. from a series of successful
military campaigns in the eastern
Mediterranean, triumphantly bear-
ing the spoils that represented the
enormous power and wealth he had
procured for himself and for Rome.
He was frustrated, however, at his
inability to capitalize on his suc-
cesses since he had settled back into
the affairs of the city. Popularity and
political power eluded him, and he
found himself involved in the poli-
tical mines and satires often held on
the steps of temples or in temporary
theaters built for specific festivals
(Frezzouls 1983).

Ancient sources state that Pompey
was invited to build Rome's first
stone theater after seeing the great
theater on the Greek island of Myti-
lene. Plutarch (Pompey, 42) says
Pompey had sketches and plans of it
drawn up so that his new theater
Pompey overcame their concerns, claiming that the sloped seats of his theater were in reality a monumental flight of steps leading up to a temple of Venus Victor, the goddess to whom he credited all his military victories (Tertullian, De spect. 10). In his theater, Pompey could stage the kinds of spectacles popular with the citizens, and they would be constantly reminded by the lavish surroundings of his achievements in their name. The theater was such a success that, according to Plutarch (Caesar, 66), the people dedicated a statue of Pompey and placed it in the senate house in the portico behind his theater. Unfortunately, Pompey’s popularity, acquired at such a cost, did not endure. As a later historian observed, “Would that Pompey had heeded the warning given him years before the outbreak of the Civil Wars, after he had completed his theater and the other public works with which he surrounded it!” (Velleius Paterculus 2.48). The theater, however, remained in use throughout the Roman period. Although later theaters and amphitheaters were to supersede it in size, the enormous popularity of Pompey’s theater is clear: some ten major restorations of the structure were undertaken, often as part of public building programs sponsored by individual emperors, giving the theater a life span of over five centuries.

For many years, scholars puzzled the size of the theater from Renaissance sketches of the lost fragments of the marble plan and concluded its capacity had been far less than the 40,000 stated by the ancient sources. One recent work has shown, however, that a ground floor plan of existing houses preserve the actual dimensions of the theater and prove that it was in fact much larger than first assumed (Capogrossi Cesnelli 1979). The dimensions of the archaeological remains measure in even units of Roman feet; the diameter of the main stage behind the theater, for example, is 500 Roman feet. When the measurements are compared to the Severan plan of the area behind the theater, we see for the first time that the theater and porticoes were designed as a single structural unit (Fig. 3). This also is borne out in the ground floor plans of existing houses, which preserve the alignment of the architectural areas in the area of the portico and gardens.

The Theoricos

The great quadrangular portico surrounding the central court was, in fact, four very different buildings whose columnar facades provided a unity for the garden as a whole (Fig. 5). The stage building separating the theater and garden on the west side bore three ceremonial portals to the central axis and or royal entrance, given a temple-like appearance, flanked by two hospitales, the entrances for visitors. The region was the great central axis of the portico’s garden. At the east end of this axis opposite the theater stood the curia, or senate house, it too flanked by two secondary rooms corresponding to the hospitales. “Had Caesar’s citizens, or citizens of Pompey’s, seen this, they might have preserved his memory, or Pompey’s very state, and in the presence of his own centurions!” (Cicero, De die 3.29.95).

The symbolic link made between the curia—the meeting place of the government—and the theater—the meeting place of the people—was an important element of the garden design. So strong were these associations that, ten years after Julius Caesar’s assassination, Augustus closed the curia and turned it into a temple (Julius Caesar) had been murdered was closed for the time being and later transformed into a public theater (Cassiodorus 47.19.1). The two rooms flanking the curia were converted into niches with lattices behind them. These lattices were found during excavations in the Largo Argentina and are visible today, along with a portion of the curia (Fig. 1).

Along the north side of the garden ran the Hexaestyclis, a portico named for its one hundred columns. Little is known of this building, except that it was next to a grove of plane trees adorned with statues of wild beasts [Martial 11.47.3]. The buildings on the south side of the garden are even less well understood. They appear to be market or shops, but the marble plan is too fragmentary to identify their precise architectural type. “[After Caesar’s assassination], gladiators who had been armed early in the morning for that day’s spectacles ran out of the theater to the screens before the curia. The theater was emptied in haste, panic and terror, and the markets were plundered” (Appian, The Civil Wars 27.118; italics added). The four colonnaded buildings of the quadrangular portico provided only limited access to the garden and the adjacent internal areas of the theater. Such security was needed to protect the lavish ornamentation of the porticoes; gold brocaded curtains were draped between the columns of the interior colonnade, paintings brought from Greece were hung on the walls of the porticoes, and both Greek and specially commissioned sculpture graced the gardens, as well as the niches, of the porticoes. “There is a picture by [Polygnotus of Thasos, a famous 5th century B.C. Greek painter] in the Porticus of Pompey which formerly hung in front of the curia which he built” (Pliny the Elder, Natural History 33.7).

The Gardens of Pompey

The Severan marble plan gives only tantalizing suggestions of the design of the garden, and certainly the details changed in the two hundred and fifty years between the time Pompey first laid it out and when it was depicted on the plan. Yet the admitted scant archaeological evidence and the rare literary descriptions suggest that the basic design remained relatively constant throughout the garden’s history.
Within the court of the quadr.portico, Pompey built a public garden, where theatergoers could stroll between performances. The garden’s rich verdure the ancient architect Vitruvius commended for its value in clarifying the vision even in antiquity, Rome was considered unhealthy.

The space in the middle [of the porticoes behind theaters] should be embellished with green things; for walking in the open air is very healthy, particularly for the eyes, since the refined and rarefied air that comes from green things... leaves the sight keen and the image distinct.

Vitruvius, The Ten Books on Architecture 5.9.1

Other sources make it clear that the garden was a popular destination in its own right, whether or not there was a spectacle at the theater.

As he had done with the theater, Pompey the Great had designed the garden to bear a political message, one somewhat toned down by Augustus’s later alterations. Its central axis is a long path that emphasizes the relationship between the curia, the regia, and the Temple of Venus Victrix atop the theater. Movement along this 30-foot-wide path was procession-like in character, perhaps intended to recall Pompey’s own triumphal procession upon his return from the victorious campaigns. On the Severan plan, an arch-like symbol terminates this processional walk near the theater. Although the triumphal arches are generally thought to date to the time of Augustus, there is fragmentary evidence to suggest that Pompey himself may have erected such a monument, in keeping with the original theme of the garden. [Augustus also moved the statue of Pompey from the hall in which Julius Caesar had been slain and placed it on a marble arch opposite the grand door of Pompey’s theater] (Suetonius, Augustus, 31).

To either side of the symbol of the arch on the marble plan appear two small rectangles whose precise meaning is impossible to decipher in the absence of any archaeological remains. The combination is far larger than any known triumphal arches. Yet alters positioned similarly near theaters are attested elsewhere, and the symbol of the arch with two rectangles shown on the marble plan is perhaps a small architected monument. A Hellenistic victory monument at Khors Khaf in Tunisia, dating to the mid 1st century B.C., may provide the best explanation for this symbol (Charles-Picard 1957). The plan of the monument is roughly equivalent in size and position to that projected for the symbols on the marble plan: 30 feet deep and 120 feet wide. Its 20-foot-high walls bear sculptural reliefs of trophies and arms, a thematic program that, as we have seen, would have been appropriate to Pompey’s building complex.

Along the main axis of the Portico, the large rectangular areas that correspond with Martial’s description of a forum duplex, or double grove. On the marble plan these rectangles are bordered with small squares with a dot in the middle. Elsewhere on

2 The only scientifically executed archaeological excavations in the Porticus of Pompey were carried out below the modern Teatro Argentina, adjacent to the Largo Argentina, in an area that lies over the edge of one of the rectangular beds shown on the marble plan (Gianfrotta et al. 1968-69). The excavators found rich brown dirt within this area and concluded that it was planting soil. Two phases were preserved, each one distinguished by soil color and datable pottery contents. The first was contemporary with Pompey the Great, and the second with Augustus’s alterations. The excavations indicated that Augustus maintained Pompey the Great’s original design and changed only the materials. For example, the outer line of the rectangles depicted

3 Today the narrow streets follow the routes of the old porticoes in the area of the theater of Pompey the Great. Here the street opens to the market and ofes of the Campo dei Fiori.
on the Severan plan appears to be a low wall that ran between the column bases. These were made of ashlar blocks in Pompeii’s time and of concrete after Augustus’s alterations (Gianfratta et al. 1965-69). The excavators found no trace of column bases or features that would explain the symbols on the plan, as the archaeological levels of the later Roman periods were completely destroyed during the Middle Ages. It is no longer possible to determine if the squares with dots depicted on the marble plan, which was drawn up some two hundred years after Augustus’s alterations, were a later addition.

Although it is impossible to accurately reconstruct the appearance of the garden in the portico at any point during its long history, literary descriptions provide us with an image of a popular meeting place, a public garden with avenues of shade trees, where one might encounter friends, pick up members of the same or opposite sex, purchase items from vendors, contemplate fine art brought from Greece, enjoy unique fountains and elaborate aquatic displays, and find shelter from the sun or rain in beautifully decorated por- toicoes. Important events of history were set here, and many powerful politicians and emperors sought to gain popular support through their additions, alterations, and restorations of this much-loved place.

[Reggio’s beloved Cynthia to return to Rome]. Oh that you would walk here in all your hours of leisure!... Yet you do not care for Pompeii’s colonnade with its shady columns brightly hung with gold-embroidered curtains, nor the avenue thickly planted with plane tree rising in trim rows, nor the waters that flow from the [statue of] Marco’s shuffling form and run babbling through their circuit until at last, with a sudden plunge, they vanish in the Triton’s mouth.

Properties 2.32.20

In time, the theater burned once too often, and the moralists, this time Christians, disapproved too forcefully of the pagan spectacles still presented there. By the 6th century the theater was no longer functional. The porticoes and gardens may have gone out of use in a less dramatic fashion: the portico area was divided in two after a fire in A.D. 290, and eventually the land may have become too valuable for these expensive gardens. As Rome’s population shrank, the city retreated into this area of the Campus Martius. Houses filled in the open areas of the gardens, and the porticoes became shops, their marble decorations plastered and burned in lime kilns for mortar. With the successive floodings of the Tiber River, the ground level rose slowly and continuously. The columns of the street porticoes were reared at higher levels until the passageways were sealed as a protection against erosion. Fragments of the columns may still be seen at points today, roses in walls along the streets of the neighborhood (Fig. 9). This gradual, consistent incorporation of the ancient design into successive urban form has preserved the buildings of Pompeii the Great, allowing us to recover their elements though we may never be able to excavate the ruins.

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