The Lost Architecture of Ancient Rome

Insights from the Severan Plan and the Regionary Catalogues

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Much of the urban fabric of ancient Rome is lost to us. The famous monuments offer a powerful testament to the grandeur of the imperial capital, and Rome’s surviving architectural legacy is rich indeed. However, it was in dwellings, shops, workshops, and other minor structures that most of the population spent most of their lives. Humble constructions like warehouses and taverns made life in this million-strong city possible, and reflected basic social realities rather than grand political image-building. In any city, such volksarchitektur is an important expression of cultural identity. Built of less substantial materials than the landmarks, the “non-monumental matrix” of ancient Rome has largely perished, or lies inaccessible under modern occupation, leaving icons like the Colosseum and grand temples to shape our image of the ancient city.

Although we are limited in our ability to explore imperial Rome’s non-monumental matrix through excavation, clues exist which can conjure ghosts of the lost thousands of buildings that once coursed with the city’s life. This article will present insights drawn from two remarkable sources of data: the Severan Marble Plan and the Regionary Catalogues (see box on The Purpose of the Marble Plan and the Regionary Catalogues).

THE SEVERAN MARBLE PLAN

The Severan Marble Plan was a 40-foot-high decorative marble map of the city of Rome, mounted on a wall inside the Templum Pacis, at one end of the sequence of imperial fora in the heart of Rome (Figs. 1, 2). Executed during the reign of Septimius Severus, the Plan is dated to between AD 203 and 211 by the inscriptions and monuments appearing on it. The map is delineated at a consistent scale of 1:240, and the extraordinary thing is that it depicted nearly every ground-floor room in the entire city. Thousands upon thousands of them are recorded in this smooth gray marble surface, along with staircases, walls, fountains, altars, and other details (see Fig. 3). Rediscovered piecemeal beginning in the 17th century, 10 percent of the Plan survives in some 700 fragments, about half of which can be assigned to specific locations in the original wall map (Carettoni et al. 1960:199–200).

The Plan is surprisingly accurate. Its overall survey was extremely close to modern measurements (Carettoni et al. 1960:231), and recent work has shown that for specific buildings the errors it contains are minor (Reynolds 1996:92–106; see Fig. 4). The Severan Plan is an amazingly complex document, and a unique record of the imperial city near its zenith. In this respect...

A lack of economic segregation was intensely characteristic of ancient Rome
Purpose of the Marble Plan and the Regionary Catalogues

These two records of ancient Rome take very different forms, yet they share a similar enigma: What were they for?

Many suggestions have been advanced over the years, especially for the Severan Marble Plan, which is most frequently supposed to have served as a cadastral (tax) record. The reality was that the Plan was mounted with its uppermost reaches over 40 feet straight up from the nearest viewer's eyes (see Fig. 1). Inaccessible for close contemplation, the Plan was also immutably carved in marble and included few inscriptions—it was no tax record. Yet the Plan's incredible detail has seemed to argue for some practical justification of all the work involved in collecting its information. The answer is that the Plan was derived from city survey documents that did serve practical purposes, inked on papyrus rolls that more than likely filled the very room in which the Plan was mounted (there appear to have been book niches in the ruins of one of the walls of its building). These plans of the city were maintained as the necessary records, piecemeal and on perishable, corrigible materials. The great marble collation of the whole body of papyrus plans was a symbolic creation, emblematic of the city's records program and possibly of the New Rome that the Emperor Septimius Severus had created by restoring so many monuments devastated in the great fire of AD 192, Severus celebrated the Century Games (Ludi Secundae) during his reign in AD 204, marking a redefinition of his formerly military image with a revised emphasis on Peace and Concord. The Plan, mounted perhaps meaningfully in the Temple of Peace, may have been rendered in that spirit.

The Regionary Catalogues, 4th century architectural census tables, are similar to the Marble Plan in that they present a great amount of difficult-to-gather information in a form that seems to defy practical usage. Though they have been dismissed as fictionalized "Rome worship," close analysis of the figures shows that the urban patterns they record are too complex and coherent to be mere inventions. The Elder Pliny (Natural History 3.66) refers to the Roman Census under Vespasian as including not only an assessment of the citizenry, but of many physical details of the city—such as the numbers of city gates and neighborhood shrines—which are among the very features tallied in the Regionary Catalogues. The Regionaries, like the Severan Plan before them, must have been abstracted from city census records for the purpose of celebrating Rome. Both documents made use of accurate, detailed information that had been compiled for official purposes and rendered it into more accessible forms for more general appreciation.

it is a unique resource. It is especially interesting for the fact that it includes not only monuments and great public spaces, but also the tenements and one-room shops of the poor (Fig. 2). The Plan helps us see Rome from top to bottom, filling in many missing pieces of our image of the city.

Fragment 11

Fragment 11 illustrates several points about Rome's urban structure (Fig. 6). First of all, it records specific architectural information concerning structures least likely to survive the ages, such as dwellings, shops, and workshops. For example, in Figure 6 can be seen classic examples of the Roman atrium house (A), well-known from Pompeii and Herculaneum. The Plan shows that even in densely crowded early 3rd century Rome, the atrium house plan endured as a dwelling for the rich. Nearby can be seen examples of apartment dwellings (B and C), in which small multipurpose rooms were grouped around open courtyards for light and air. Single rooms frequently served as the entire dwelling space for poor families. Many dozens of other examples on the Plan show that this particular form of apartment dwelling was especially characteristic of Rome, although the form is not common at Pompeii or Ostia, our two other principal sites in Italy for studying Roman imperial urban structure. The Plan serves as a vital and unique source of evidence, providing data that could not be extrapolated from other sources.

Fragment 11 further illustrates several points about the general nature of Rome's urban fabric. First of all is the close juxtaposition of the houses of the wealthy and the single-room high-rise apartment dwellings of the poor. As this and many other Plan fragments show, there was no significant economic segregation in Rome. While some neighborhoods acquired reputations as higher or lower class than others, they displayed nothing like the strict modern American economic segregation with which we are familiar, in which new dwellings are grouped with others of their own economic status.

FIG. 1. RECONSTRUCTION OFROME'S SEVERAN MARBLE PLAN in its original setting in the Templum Pacis complex. Its spectacular size is often under-appreciated. The furnishings of the room are unknown, so this drawing represents the room just after the Plan was completed, before the furnishings were installed.

By David War Reynolds

FIG. 2. RECONSTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLUM PACIS, the building housing the Marble Plan.

By Inés Giménez (1937) in Carteroni et al. 1969-1981
whether they are seas of identical apartments or subdivisions of dozens of similar large houses. A lack of economic segregation was intensely characteristic of ancient Rome and remained common in Italian cities into the modern era.

Second, the fragment illustrates the intermixing of residential and commercial architecture. This occurred in most street-front buildings, which commonly had shops on either side of an entrance hall leading into a residence behind the shops (F, Fig. 6). Some one-room shops had back rooms as dwellings for the shopkeeper and his family (D). In the illustrated fragment, we can even see the close juxtaposition of a workshop (E) with the houses of the rich. This is another contrast to the modern American urban form created by urban zoning laws which keep separate architectural classes geographically distinct. The same contrast is illustrated by the close juxtaposition of different levels of commercial operations—the workshop and the tabernae—where we typically separate such levels as light industrial and retail.

The comparison to modern America helps illustrate that there is no “default” urban structure. Cities of different cultures differ in fabric as much as they may differ in architectural styles. There is a tremendous range of possibilities—some ancient cities even lacked streets—and each facet of urban fabric may be examined as an expression of culture. In our present example of Imperial Rome, it is interesting to consider the reality of close physical mixing of social classes against the literary image of the distinct separation of those classes in many social practices. The contrast to modern America is again striking, where the social ideal of equal citizens meets the structural practices of strict architectural segregation.

Rome’s non-monumental architecture was thoroughly intermixed, with the urban fabric being fundamentally of the same composition all over the city (Fig. 7). With its characteristic type of high-rise courtyard apartments, this fabric was significantly different from the urban composition of such preserved sites as Ostia and Pompeii.

THE REGIONARY CATALOGUES

From the Severan Plan, we turn to another unique resource for the investigation of ancient Rome: the Regionary Catalogues (see Jordan 1907). The Regionaries are 4th-century architectural census tables for the city of Rome (divided into fourteen wards, or regiones, by Augustus; hence the name given to the tables). Included in these tables are tallies of the numbers of various kinds of buildings and urban features—bakeries, houses, street fountains, and so on—organized by region. There are also lists and tallies of the city’s landmarks. There are two versions of the Regionaries. That known as the Carismus is identified as the older and more reliable manuscript, the original dating to shortly after AD 357 (North 1956:8–11). The Regionary Catalogues are a special topographic resource which provides vital assistance in the assessment of ancient Rome’s urban structure. Though frequently given pos-

FIG. 4a, b. Archaeological excavation of the Circus Maximus spandrii (earred seating area) accords with details delineated on the Marble Plan, even to the placement of stairs within certain rooms (indicated with V symbols on the Plan).
(a) Marble Plan fragment by Paul Zimmerman after Rodriguez-Aznárez 1981; (b) excavation plan from Stoddard 1991, fig. 119

FIG. 5. The Marble Plan depicts both prominent public monuments (such as the Portico of Livia, shown here) and the warren of anonymous domestic and commercial architecture that filled the city. For the study of this “non-monumental urban matrix,” the Plan is a unique resource.
By Paul Zimmerman after Rodriguez-Aznárez 1981

FIG. 6. Fragment 11 of the Marble Plan illustrates a variety of building types, all in close proximity. Rich and poor, commercial and residential, all were intermixed in the urban fabric of ancient Rome.
By Paul Zimmerman after Rodriguez-Aznárez 1981
ing mention, the Regioaries are almost never engaged in depth, and important aspects of these documents have never been explored.

A crucial step in making the regiary statistical data useful is their conversion into density figures. First, the density figures show that the numbers recorded in the Regioaries are not as high as some have claimed, exaggerated. They form a pattern which is comparable to density figures that may be derived from excavations at other parts of the city. For instance, the figures for Rome are not unusually higher, and in some cases they are lower (Reynolds 1996:254, 284). Through these figures, the macrostructure of Rome can be explored. The relative levels of development in different parts of the city can be examined in ways not possible through the Plan or any other means. This macrostructural study also complements the microstructural data of individual buildings and neighborhoods provided by the Marble Plan, and makes possible a more comprehensive urban analysis of ancient Rome. Here we will focus on two particular topics illuminated by the Regioaries: the high-rise apartments and the neighborhood baths.

Rome's High-Rise Apartments: The Insulae

The Roman apartment block, or insula (literally, "island"), has been too often characterized on the basis of the famous ruins at Ostia, where well-built brick apartment blocks of standard plan still stand in testament to Roman order and construction technique. Characteristic of Ostia, they are not necessarily characteristic of Rome, in spite of the fact that they are often pressed into service for scholarly studies describing the capital. The Roman insulae ran frequently to seven stories and higher, and ancient commentators describe them as built by speculators on the cheap.

One of the friends of Aulus Gallus remarked at the extraordinary rental income realized by landlords of city property, and declared that he would sell off his country estates to buy land in the city, if only the city did not burn so often (Aulus Gallus 15.1.3). Rome's insulae were commonly built with wood and mud construction in their upper sections, rather than the sturdy brick and concrete work familiar from foundations and surviving insulae in Ostia (Vitruvius 2.8.20). This made the apartment blocks infamous fire hazards, as well as dangerously unstable (Seneca, On Ages 3.35.4-5). The fear of one's dwelling collapsing was real in Rome, where the poor often slept "with the beams in ruin above" (Juvenal 3.194-196). It may be easy for us to lose sight of these stumbling stones as we imagine the marble Rome Augustus claimed to have left, but according to the evidence they were an overwhelming presence.

The plot of insula densities (Fig. 8) shows that the greatest concentrations of apartment buildings occurred in the city center. In Region VIII (Roman Forum, Region X (Palatine), and especially in Region XI (Circus Maximus). These high densities are particularly surprising, because in each of these regions there were substantial areas given over to open space or public buildings.

One of the implications of this level of density is that the monuments preserved today were absolutely surrounded by dwellings in antiquity. The "monumental matrix into which it was set is rarely given sufficient consideration.

The Forum of Trajan was extravagantly praised in antiquity for the great impression it made on visitors, and while the porticoes and Basilica Ulpia were indeed of grand proportions, it would seem that the simple rectangular design would not have been especially inspiring (Fig. 10). However, the density figures from the Regioaries demonstrate that the Forum reconstitutes in the mind the lost masses of insulae filling every available space in the central zones of the city, indeed towering over the very Forum of Trajan as the anecdote about the collapsing building attests (Fig. 11). In this overcrowded, overwhelming esplophy of insulae, the clean sweep of the vast open space of Trajan's Forum would have made a
strong impression. In reaching this forum a visitor would have to pass through the dense residential areas, and would always have been conscious of the extraordinary contrast presented by the grand plaza.

It was in fact this aspect of the Forum, rather than some feature like the basilica’s ornate appointments, that struck the companion of Constantius when that emperor visited Rome for the first time in AD 356. Constantius entered the Forum of Trajan and, awe-struck at it all, vowed that he would copy the equestrian statue that stood in its center. “First, sir,” replied prince Ormisd of Persia, “build a similar stable for your steed, if you can, so that it can range as freely as the one which we see here” (Ammianus Marcellinus 16.10.15-16). This comment, and other reactions to the imperial fora in antiquity, are better understood in light of the insula density information from the Regiunculae Catalogues. The extraordinary concentration of dwellings in the city center should be taken into account in any assessment of this part of Rome.

The insulae contained apartments both spacious and cramped, both pleasant and miserable; conditions grew worse as one climbed higher flights of stairs. Most of the city’s flats would have been single-room garrets, and these underline the degree to which poor Romans necessarily conducted their lives outside their homes. One of the most characteristic of Roman buildings is the bath, an amenity typically enjoyed in a public rather than a domestic setting. The grand imperial baths (or thermae) are well known and justly famous from their surviving ruins, but evidence shows that the very small neighborhood bath-houses, or balnea, were more significant part of Rome’s urban fabric than we have given them credit for.

The Neighborhood Baths of Rome

The plot for balnea (Fig. 12) shows that they are found throughout the city. This is what we would expect based on the Marble Plan, which small baths appear in many locations (Staccioli 1961). According to the Regiunculae figures, only one region, IX (the monumental zone Campus Martius), rates as relatively low in density of balnea. In general the density of small baths follows the density of residential matrix as indicated in the plots (for insulae and domus [private houses]). This suggests that while baths were essential all over the city, more were required for the heavy population in the city center. The particularly high densities in regions VII and I can be explained by the fact that these lie along the main transport corridors leading into the city, the Via Flaminia to the north, and the Via Appia and Latina emerging from the southeast in Region I (Fig. 13). Travelers arriving in the city must have desired bathing facilities to refresh themselves soon after passing the main gates.

The great imperial thermae are certainly important, but they are only part of the picture of Roman bathing, and a smaller part than the spectacular remains of thermae still standing in Rome would suggest. The Plan and the Regiunculae help us to address this skewed image and re-evaluate the role of minor baths in the ancient city.

The imperial baths were huge and luxurious complexes, offering spectacular public amenities the like of which the world has never seen again. How could the city market sustain humble minor baths when such competition for patrons existed? One might expect that the imperial baths would replace the old smaller private baths, increasingly as more large thermae were built over time. The first public complex was built by Agrippa in 38 BCE. This set the foundation for the long tradition of imperial public baths that was to follow, and which indeed was to become one of the most characteristic

FIG. 10. THE MAIN PLAZA OF THE FORUM OF TRAJAN was much beloved in antiquity. It consisted of a large rectangular open space of simple design. Much of its impact must have come from the contrast it presented against the surrounding thicket of high-rise apartments. Reproduced from Frank Sear, Roman Architecture. Copyright Frank Sear 1942. Used by permission of the American publisher, Cornell University Press.

FIG. 11. TENEMENT-STYLE BUILDINGS RISE OVER TRAJAN’S MARKETS (background center) in this reconstruction of the Forum of Trajan. The image helps to mind the densely packed thousands of lost apartment buildings that surrounded this and other monuments in imperial Rome, as recorded on the Severan Marble Plan. By G. Gattiachi, from Gattiachi 1924: pl. 69.

FIG. 12. DENSITY OF BALNEA, or small baths, in 4th century AD Rome, according to the Regiunculae Catalogues. Graphic by Paul Zimmerman after author’s original.

FIG. 13. VON GERRAN IDENTIFIED THE BOUNDARIES OF ROME’S REGIONS based on the landmarks listed for each of them in the Regiunculae Catalogues. His painstaking work was the basis for the regional maps in the present study. The major transport corridors of Rome were associated with higher densities of residential and commercial architecture, particularly small baths. By Paul Zimmerman after Von Gerran 1949.
traits of Roman urbanism, within the imperial city and throughout the Empire. Most aqueducts to Roman cities throughout the Empire were built not for drinking water supply, but to feed baths large and small (Hodge 1989:128). Beginning with Nero, a succession of emperors built public bath complexes in Rome throughout the first four centuries AD. Typically, the newest complex was even larger and more splendid than the last.

The baths of Diocletian, built at the beginning of the 4th century, covered over 30 acres (13 hectares), or an area roughly equal to that of the original settlement of the Roman city of Timgad in Algeria. By the time of the Regionary Catalogues there were eleven imperial bath complexes. The amenities of these were extraordinarily luxurious. They were constructed on a titanic scale, made of precious materials, filled with superb art, and offered not only hot, cold, and warm water, but also exercise areas, libraries, lecture halls, and an almost endless variety of physical and mental pursuits, pleasures, invigorations, relaxations, and diversions. These facilities allowed the meanest Roman citizen to live like an emperor; the environment they provided was unsurpassed, and admission to them was free.

What becomes very striking, considering the evidence from the Marble Plan and the Regionaries, is that in the 4th century these imperial baths, for all their luxury and amenities and their free admission, had not eroded the role of neighborhood baths at all. The Plan and the Regionaries attest a perhaps surprising reality, and show that the minor baths held an important place in Rome’s urban fabric that was all their own. In fact, by the time of the Regionaries, neighborhood balnea were more common than ever. The number had grown consistently over time. In 33 BC Agrippa ordered the census of baths within the city, and recorded the number 170.

In the 1st century AD Pliny regarded the number as “uncountable” (Natural History 36.121). Fragments of the Severan Marble Plan attest that small baths seem to have been tucked in everywhere—in and among warehouses, in thickly populated areas, and wedged into odd corners. The Regionaries support this impression. Only one region is listed with as few as 15 small baths (Region XI, Circus Maximus); the next lowest number is 44 and nine regions are listed with at least 75. In all, the Regionaries record a 4th century total of 856 private baths. These baths were not expensive, but they did charge admission.

The balnea clearly served a different purpose from that of the thermae. The balnea were regarded as a basic aspect of the city’s identity and structure, and this was doubtless due to the social interactions that they fostered, probably among relatively small bodies of clientele. The familiarity of one’s customary local bath, along with the sight of well-known fellow bathers there, must have provided an important sense of community and identity, beyond the family but still intimately small (Nielsen 1990:146). Balnea were integral to a city’s romanitas, and were probably sources of significant social comfort for the inhabitants of the largest city in the ancient world.

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The structure of a city offers useful study as a major expression of the building culture. The urban form of ancient Rome is partially preserved in the Marble Plan and the Regionary Catalogues. It is not quite a “virtual Pompeii” that can be reconstructed from these records, but while most of the non-monumental architecture may be long gone or out of reach, the urban fabric of the city is far from lost, and it yet holds many insights for our investigation.

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