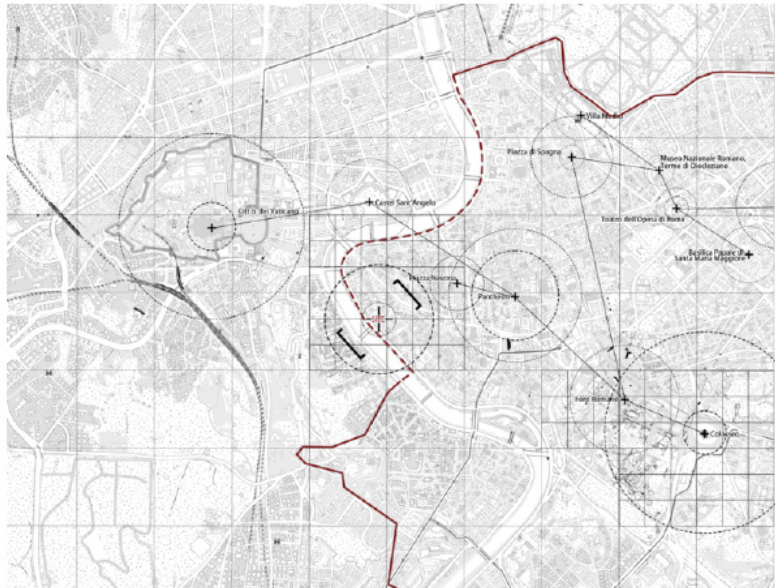


# A Garden on Via Giulia Reconnecting the City, the Archeology and the Tiber

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**Rome – Poly Centers.**  
(Source: EU2015 at Iowa State University Rome Center)

## **ABSTRACT**

The unfinished garden on Via Giulia in Rome, situated between Piazza della Moretta and Lungotevere, presents a unique and significant architectural opportunity. Although the Tiber River is nearby, it remains obscured by Lungotevere, disconnecting it from the urban landscape. Restoring this relationship, which has been severed by embankments built to protect the city from flooding—a danger now heightened by climate change—is both desirable and essential.

Many initiatives have attempted to rejuvenate the riverbank, yet they often fail to establish a true connection with the city above. To create a more meaningful and lasting connection, any development on the riverbank must resonate with the urban context above the embankment, potentially starting within the city itself and descending gradually to the river's edge. The original design confines the garden within its boundaries, focusing solely on its character as a domestic Roman garden. However, this approach misses the opportunity to restore its relationship with the Tiber. This paper proposes to use the new urban garden on Via Giulia as a starting point for this endeavor. The garden on Via Giulia could embrace a broader vision,

aiming to reconnect with the river that has profoundly influenced Rome's history.

Keywords: Urban Garden, Piazza della Moretta, Rome, Tiber River, Via Giulia, Riverbank Rejuvenation, River-City Relationship

## INTRODUCTION

Tracing the origins of a city is often intrinsically linked to its relationship with water—be it a river, lake, or sea. However, the threat of floods, now increasingly exacerbated by climate change, has often turned this once vital resource into a formidable adversary, prompting many cities to distance themselves from their waterways. Rome exemplifies this phenomenon, with its connection to the Tiber River severed by the imposing construction of embankments.

This paper seeks to investigate the potential for re-establishing the connection between the city and the river, organizing the discourse around five critical themes: the historical and contemporary interpretations of the city, the symbolic significance of water as a foundational theoretical element, the pivotal role of Via Giulia, the concept of the Roman garden, and a speculative proposal to reconnect the garden with the river.

In examining Rome, this study integrates textual and spatial analyses to provide a nuanced understanding of the city. It investigates into both historical and contemporary urban narratives, demonstrating how traditional literary sources and the city as a living, dynamic text converge to reveal Rome as a multifaceted system. The exploration of “lived experience” offers a unique perspective, particularly in the context of Via Giulia and the garden project, and considers the potential relationship between these spaces, the river, and adjacent urban elements, such as the piazza and the bridge.



1. Piazza della Moretta 2. The Garden 3. Via Giulia

Image 1 Site Information. (Source: Google Map)

With the designers in mind, this paper offers a synthesis of historical context and theoretical underpinnings to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on urban design and

the reintegration of natural elements within the cityscape. Rather than proposing a specific design, it provides critique and recommendations aimed at encouraging speculative and innovative interventions that honor the project's enduring heritage. For this approach, the paper integrates the literature review and analysis within the 'Analysis and Discussion' section, creating a cohesive narrative that allows the literature to be discussed directly in the context of the findings, enabling a seamless comparison of results with existing studies and theories.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The aim of this exploration, as presented in this paper, is to reestablish the connection between the city and the river. Any project on the riverbank must resonate with the urban context above the embankment. Therefore, the approach proposed here is not to begin at the riverbank but rather from the city, working gradually down toward the river. This rationale informed the selection of the garden project on Via Giulia, utilizing a straightforward methodology commonly employed by designers: *case study and analysis, critique, and speculation*.

Guided by Le Corbusier's "Lesson of Rome" in *Toward an Architecture* (original title: *Vers une Architecture*), translated by John Goodman (2007), this approach acknowledges that fresh, innovative insights often emerge from perspectives outside the familiar, challenging conventional wisdom and uncovering new possibilities. Historical research is embraced as a crucial tool, illuminating past patterns and transformations to inform contemporary solutions.

## **ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION**

This section integrates the literature review directly within the context of the findings and analysis, organized around five key themes: *The Lesson of Rome*—which integrates both historical and contemporary interpretations of the city; *The Tiber, the Water, Reflection*—examining the symbolic significance of water as a theoretical foundation; *Via Giulia*—introducing this important street; *Flora*—discussing the concept of the Roman garden; and finally, *The Garden on Via Giulia*—offering a speculative connection between the garden and the river.



Image 2 1748 Map of Rome from Giambattista Nolli's *Pianta Grande de Roma*.

## **The Lesson of Rome**

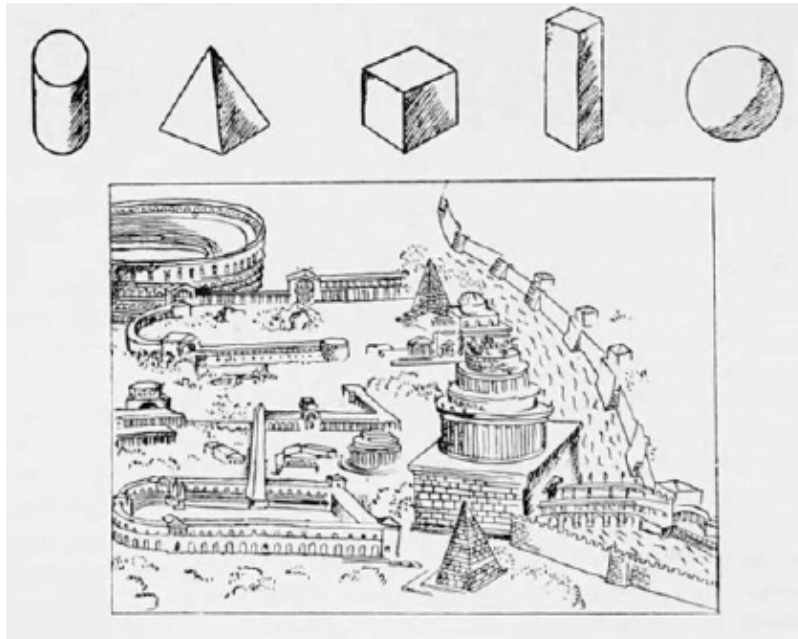
Rome, once the epicenter of a vast empire, imposed its urban model on cities within its dominion. However, Rome itself diverges from the urban framework it propagated elsewhere. The city's map has always been a complex reflection of its shifting power dynamics and historical struggles, from antiquity through Christendom and into the present. The Nolli map vividly illustrates the intricate relationship between domestic and civic buildings and the connection between public spaces and private gardens (Figure 2).

Each shift in power and distribution is inscribed into Rome's urban fabric. Every "construction [of edifices or other urban components, such as gardens, walls, streets, bridges, or mausoleums] became a reason for conflict (Cafà, 2010, p.440) following the so-called Avignonese captivity, the city underwent major modifications. The 'romanam curiam sequentes', the court and administration that followed the traditionally itinerant pope, settled in the city, leading to Rome's population doubling in the space of a few years. Furthermore, with the support of the pope, the members of the curia came to take possession of spaces, offices, roles and rituals that had previously been the reserve of the local Romans.

This article considers the reaction of the community of the local nobility (here described summarily as Roman families," leaving indelible marks on the city's map. What can be inferred from this palimpsestic map? A master plan is impractical for Rome. Each urban intervention must be precisely attuned to its context, yet its impacts are far-reaching. Any modification within the city can resonate across the broader urban landscape.

From a contemporary perspective, Le Corbusier (1923) acknowledges that Rome is not an easily understood city. Appreciating it requires patience, courage, knowledge, and deep examination. Consequently, proposing a design or project—such as reconnecting the city with the Tiber—demands a careful balance of humility and audacity. He describes Rome as a city that is "gentle, brutal, charming, and dignified," observing that many of its elements, such as building forms and urban systems, interact without clear relationships or practical connections (p.195).

To comprehend Rome, Le Corbusier focused on the interplay of margins, cubes, surfaces, silhouettes, lines, and the seemingly chaotic geometric forms that unexpectedly coalesce into a coherent silhouette. His fascination with the assembly of volumes is evident in his sketches, as captured in his book. Le Corbusier distilled the shapes he observed in Rome's streets—such as the Mausoleum of Hadrian and the Pyramid of Caius Cestius—into primary forms (Figure 3) that became foundational elements of his architectural vocabulary (Corbusier et al., 2007, p.200). Amidst this complexity, he distinguishes between architecture that moves him and the practical houses built by engineers, which he argues do not qualify as architecture and fail to touch his heart (p.195). He understands that the lessons of Rome and its history enable him to create modern designs that respect the ancient without merely replicating it.



**Image 3** Le Corbusier's sketch of Rome selected important buildings with simplified geometric volumes. (Source: *Toward an Architecture*, Le Corbusier, 2007, p.200)

The vast history of Rome necessitates a localized examination, focusing on specific areas of the city rather than attempting to encompass its entire expansive and non-cohesive landscape. This literature review addresses essential themes to provide readers with a deeper understanding of the site, including the significance of water and the Tiber River, the historical and contextual background of Via Giulia, a contemporary perspective of the city as articulated in *The Lesson of Rome*—a subtitle borrowed from Le Corbusier's *Toward an Architecture* (2007)—and the design of the new garden on Via Giulia by VOGT.

### **The Tiber, the Water, Reflection**

In the foreword to Bachelard's *Water and Dreams* (2006, p.vii), Joanne Stroud reflects on the elemental nature of water, stating that “[w]ater—like fire, earth, and air—is an element in a pre-Socratic sense and is [already] both ‘inner’ and ‘outer’.” This perspective underscores water’s dual role as both an internal and external element, a quality that can be similarly applied to the Tiber. The river, with its historical significance and enduring presence, embodies a blend of introverted and extroverted characteristics. It serves as a contemplative backdrop while dynamically engaging with the surrounding urban environment, thus bridging the garden’s introspective qualities with the river’s expansive influence.

Bachelard explains that the world, in a sense, is narcissistic: “The world wants to see itself, to be seen. [Then], water reveals, reflects.” However, when the water is murky, it loses its reflective capacity, failing to reveal the wisdom of the past to the narcissistic present. This failure to reconnect keeps the present ensnared in self-obsession, thereby making it an invitation to protect this ancient river—a living witness to the city’s enduring history.

Moreover, Bachelard asserts that the psychological benefit of using water as a mirror lies in its ability to render our reflection more natural. He argues that a conventional mirror is too refined, too precise, too easily controlled—too Cartesian. It reflects an image that is merely an appearance, always just out of reach—a condition that Pallasmaa (2024) describes as the hegemony of vision, where sight dominates our perception. The river, in its constant flux<sup>1</sup>, reminds us of our permanent impermanence. The present and whatever lies “deep down there”<sup>2</sup> collapse into the reflection on the river’s surface, opening up the imagination (p.21) to something deep and ancient. If a river is a poem, Bachelard is less concerned with the poem’s entirety and more interested in the images and moments that arise throughout its lifespan. He invites us to see the poem not merely as a single idea but as a collection of diverse life experiences. Capturing an image or a moment in a poem is perfectly fine, even if the entire poem isn’t rehearsed.

### **Via Giulia**

Via Giulia is a historically significant street in Rome, Italy, extending about one kilometer

along the east bank of the Tiber River from Piazza San Vincenzo Pallotti to Piazza dell’Oro (Delli, 1988). Designed by Donato Bramante and commissioned by Pope Julius II in 1508, it was among the first major urban planning projects of Renaissance papal Rome. The road, named after its patron, was intended to create a major artery in a new street system, establish a grand avenue to reflect the Catholic Church’s renewed grandeur, and set up a new administrative and banking center near the Vatican, distancing it from the traditional center of Capitoline Hill.

### **Flora**

The four women from Stabiae, discovered in 1759 during the excavation at Castellammare di Stabiae in Campania, perhaps best represent the Roman garden. Among them -- Flora, Leda, Medea, and Diana -- it is Flora who offers something uniquely mysterious and poetic for the concept of a garden.

“Wearing a yellow robe, seductively slipping off one shoulder, [Flora] turns her half-naked back towards the viewer. Her left arm cradles a basket of flowers; her right hand reaches out to pluck a spray of cream-colored blossoms. Her head is angled so that she almost, but not quite, reveals her profile. It is this aura of mystery, anticipating a moment of eternally deferred revelation, that makes her the favorite among the quartet of sister-images discovered at the Villa Arianna.” (Stackelberg, 2009, p.1)

Flora is the only one of the four women who conceals her face from the viewer, and her fresco is unique in that it provides a sense of place, implying that she is situated somewhere, without being too specific. This location might be a field, a meadow, or a garden, evoking connections between mythical and literary gardens

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1 The phrase “Panta rei” (Πάντα ῥεῖ), attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, translates to “everything flows,” signifying the constant change in the world. Heraclitus famously stated that one cannot step into the same river twice, as the flow of water continuously alters the river. Similarly, the park at the top of this website is never identical upon reloading the page or navigating elsewhere—it, too, is in a state of perpetual change.

2 “Deep down there”, a terminology used by Gerard Manley Hopkins in his poetry, *God’s Grandeur* (1877).

and those experienced in real life. The Roman garden was as much an idea as it was a physical location, serving as both a social space and a cultural construct.

### **A Garden on Via Giulia**

On Via Giulia, a new garden designed by VOGT (VOGT Landscape Architects, n.d) (Figure 5), was constructed to address a long-standing undefined urban void. However, the construction was suspended, possibly due to the discovery of ancient Roman stables or other reasons. The garden, named “*Pairi Daeza*,” or paradise, derives from the old Persian word *pairidaeza* (Fakour, 2000, pp.297-298), which “encompasses the concept of a walled enclosure, often associated with pleasure parks and gardens of delights” (Amini, 2024, pp.212-213).” This garden was intended to invite both locals and visitors to enjoy a lush urban space.

Overgrown with trees and vines, it evokes the appearance of a centuries-old Roman villa garden. From the outside, it feels like a hidden world, separated from the busy city, with tree canopies and climbers creating a dialogue with the Farnese gardens. Inside, the garden is vibrant and diverse, organized on three levels: *atrio*, *giardino*, *frutteto*, and *giardino segreto*. The *atrio*, on the same level as Via Giulia, features a large water basin as a neighborhood gathering spot. The *frutteto*, resembling an ancient *limonaia*, offers a shaded area with fruit trees. The secret garden, on the highest level, combines trees, climbers, and ancient ruins, forming a new layer in Rome’s urban geology.



**Image 4 The Ara Pacis Museum, 1996–2006, Richard Meier, Rome. View toward main entrance. A modest symbolic reference to the Tiber by creating a fountain at the plaza in front of the museum. (Source of Bottom Figure: Google, modified).**

The garden on Via Giulia represents a striking modern reimagining of the Roman private garden. Designed to gracefully span the elevated ground of Via Giulia while embracing the lower terrain of Via Bravaria by Lungotevere, it subtly acknowledges the difference in elevation. The choice of the ancient Persian term *Pairi Daeza* adds an intriguing layer of meaning, suggesting the designer’s intent to evoke a sense of historical continuity without directly referencing the Roman domestic garden. Instead, elements of Roman garden vocabulary—such as *giardino*, *frutteto*, *limonaia*, and *giardino segreto*—are reinterpreted within a free, contemporary layout. The garden is envisioned as a contemporary ruin, “[p]artly neglected, with

water basins full of plants, overgrown with old trees and vines overgrown with old trees and vines, it seems to have been there for centuries, forgotten.” (VOGT Landscape Architects, n.d).

While the discussion of a new garden on Via Giulia might initially appear introspective and self-contained, focused on its own design and “domestic” character, its location alongside one of Rome’s most historically and symbolically significant rivers—the Tiber—adds a deeper dimension. Despite the garden’s seemingly introverted nature, its proximity to this prominent natural feature suggests it could play a more significant civic role. This garden has the potential to forge a stronger connection with the Tiber. While the Ara Pacis Museum symbolically engages with the river through a fountain in the new piazza (Figure 4), this gesture may not be sufficient. The garden could explore further possibilities, such as integrating with the embankment—carefully designed to eliminate flood risks—or extending its reach from above.



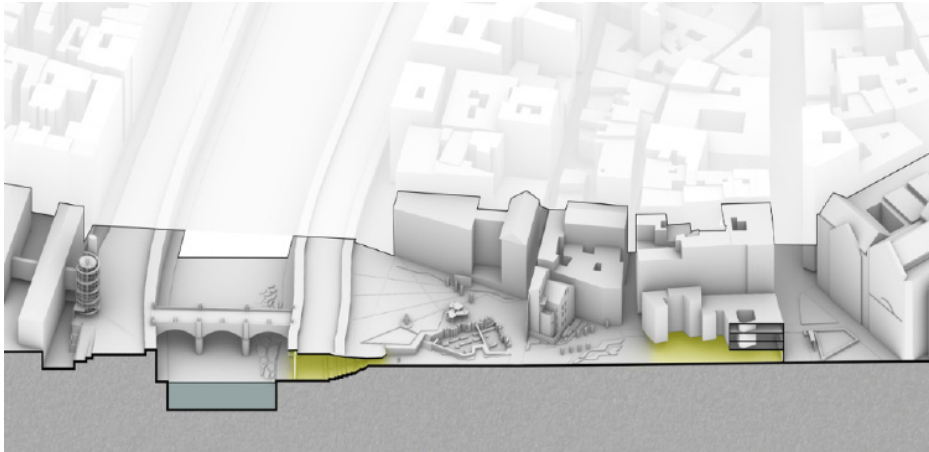
Image 5 Project by VOGT, Pairi Daeza, Via Giulia, Rome.  
(Source: VOGT. Via Giulia, Rome. Pairi Daeza., n.d.)

## CONCLUSION

In Rome, urban interventions should be approached through fragmented, micro-systemic solutions to address broader macro issues. VOGT’s “*Pairi Daeza*” (Figure 5) can be viewed as forms of contemporary archaeology or projections of potential futures, informed by the traces embedded in the present. By examining historical contexts, these projects offer valuable insights into how contemporary design can evolve.

This approach may involve creating ephemeral interventions within Roman public spaces, exploring peripheries and interstitial areas, or making modifications within the constraints of acceptable conservation parameters. Such analysis not only bridges the past and present but also paves the way for innovative design solutions that respect and enhance the existing urban fabric. Most importantly, the garden should reflect the cultural “internal” perspective of Rome’s current residents, capturing their conscious design response to their collective garden memory in the city.





**Image 6 A Speculation to Connect the Garden by Cutting the Embankment.**

(Source: EU2015 at Iowa State University Rome Center; ZSun, JPeng, YWang, YZhao, NZeng)

The Garden on Via Giulia stands out for its unique qualities. Although intimate and domestic in scale, the project also embodies social and literary dimensions, reimagining the concept of the Roman garden in a contemporary context. This paper elevates the garden's significance by proposing an extended connection toward the Tiber River, thereby creating an architectural dialogue with the broader urban landscape. The garden's location on Via Giulia inherently involves engaging with the Lungotevere, the Tiber, Ponte Giuseppe Mazzini, and the nearby Piazza della Moretta (Figure 1). Given that its construction is currently on hold, there is a compelling case for a bolder design gesture that is both domestic and urban—such as cutting into the embankment (Figure 6) to create a direct physical connection with the riverbank.

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