

# **Re\_Claiming** an industrial area of Mira Lanza in the city of Rome

Rediscovery of historical urban evidence  
Reuse of abandoned industrial heritage  
Strategy of urban design

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## Chapter 1. Preservation.

One of the things about Rome that immediately attracts attention is the number of tourists in the city center. The attraction of Rome as a cultural hotspot has made it one of the most popular destinations on the globe. In fact, Rome is the fourth most visited city in Europe<sup>1</sup>. However, the influx of the tourists has grown so much over recent years that the city has become endangered through overcrowding. And the mass tourist numbers make life very unpleasant for locals trying to go about their daily lives.

'The commercialization of culture can undermine the soul of a tourist destination. Local traditions that have a rich cultural heritage are reduced to wearing costumes and putting on acts for the tourists in return for money.'<sup>2</sup>

It is not far-fetched to say that Rome city center has become occupied by tourists. Central Rome started losing its identity due to their enormous number. Everything the city has to offer is on offer. But the demand became too high. There are thousands of hotels to accommodate the visitors, international shopping giants that sell clothing produced in other countries, countless overpriced restaurants with food that is losing any similarities with Italian cuisine. The tourist excess is becoming unmanageable and it feels like central Rome no longer belongs to its citizens.

Rigorous preservation of Rome heritage doesn't allow for new development. While Rome historical heritage is a true treasure, the life of its inhabitants has become more difficult today. In a way, Rome city center has almost become a huge open-air museum.

'Treasures of memory preserve the past as a virtual present. Yet the cultural past remains dead if it is nothing but treasured. Only in the act of appropriation, comprehension and sometimes re-enactment does it come alive.'<sup>3</sup> For example, the famous Baths of Caracalla in 1960 hosted gymnastics competitions of the Olympic Games. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century the central part of the Baths has been used for concerts and plays outdoors and, particularly, for the summer season of dell'Opera di Roma. However, many other places in Rome are 'nothing but treasured', so they remain dead for the city life.

The further one moves from the city center, the easier it becomes to see the real life of Rome. In contrast to famous ruins of ancient city such as Roman Forum, the 'ruins' of Mira Lanza stand abandoned. But this former industrial site is as much Rome's heritage as the Roman Forum is. Admittedly, not as historically valuable, but nevertheless, worth preserving. Only, in this case, there are opportunities to approach the area with more liberty, to make something more from these ruins and to intertwine them with new design for the site, to integrate the area within the city urban fabric.

The theme of Re\_Claiming Rome relates not only to reevaluation of residual presence to be rediscovered and interpreted, it can also be considered as reclaiming city's identity and its power to change and evolve. 'In the end of this process the sites should get again a valuable position that contributes to the construction of the new Rome.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hopper.com, the big-data-driven site and mobile app that tracks and predicts airfare.

<sup>2</sup> The advantages and Disadvantages of tourism. Paul Goodman. 2016, [www.soapboxie.com](http://www.soapboxie.com)

<sup>3</sup> Graduation Studio Assignment. Public Buildings/Rome. TU Delft, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Graduation Studio Assignment. Public Buildings/Rome. TU Delft, 2016.

The size of the area of Mira Lanza is around 7,5 hectares. In comparison, the size of a city block in Manhattan is 2 hectares; in *Eixample*, Barcelona it is 1,8 hectares. Combined with the opportunity to connect the area to the river, Mira Lanza requires an approach on a larger – urban scale.

One of the major themes of the seminar was the struggle between Urban Planning and Urban Design, the possibility of architecture to get rid of the planning activity.

Aldo Rossi in his 'Architecture of the City' expressed uncertainty with the general ideology of modernism indicating certain aspects of failure of modern architecture. The context of the problem was the twentieth century town planning approaches, which generated some cities as machines. Architecture here does not mean the visible image of the city and the sum of its different architectures but architecture as a construction of the city overtime.

The 1978 exhibition "Roma Interrotta" marked a turning point in the relationship between architecture and the city. The project assigned each architect a section Nolli's famous plan for Rome from 1748, from which they would develop a fictional project. One of its outcomes was the formulation of a paradigm of Urban Design, which has been applied worldwide through the 20th Century.<sup>5</sup>

Christiaanse also demonstrates the struggle between architecture and urban planning, which he describes as 'creation of conditions that allow a certain possibility for development'.<sup>6</sup> But Rem Koolhaas was the first who succeeded to claim a possibility for architecture to get rid of the planning activity. He managed to bridge the gap between architecture and planning.

In the Context of Rome, Tiber river is a prime example of this struggle. It has sustained Rome since its foundation, the presence of water representing a crucial factor for its development and historical continuity. It is only during recent times that the river lost its open and direct connection with the city through the demolition of the former buildings on the banks and the achievement of boulevards flanking the river and massive retaining walls (*muraglioni*). The 'overwhelming planning activity' won.

This struggle between the architecture and urban planning proves to be very important to realize the context of contemporary architectural discourse and see the possibilities that the site of Mira Lanza has to offer. As is mentioned above, there is a need to approach the site from an urban perspective.

The area can be considered as Rossi's 'urban artifact', which like the city itself is characterized by its own history and thus by its own form. The urban artifacts such as a building, a street, a district, like Mira Lanza, are considered as a work of art, which are the manifestations of social and religious life.

For the project 'Berlin: A Green Archipelago' Ungers said: 'The first operation of such a project ought to be the identification and selection of those areas that already have a strong existing identity that deserves to be preserved and reinforced.'<sup>7</sup> It can also relate to the smaller area of Mira Lanza. At the moment, it stands in ruins, which only shows the potential for the future development. There is a need to clean the area, to preserve only the structures that compose the identity of Mira Lanza to give the opportunity for the new vision for the site.

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<sup>5</sup> GSAPP. roma2025gsapp.wordpress.com

<sup>6</sup> KCAP. Situation Interview. NAI Publishers, Rotterdam.

<sup>7</sup> The City in the city. Manifesto (1977) by O. M. Ungers. F. Hertweck, S. Marot.

## Chapter 2. Context.

### 2.1 Historical evidence.

'In architectural practice, the use of design precedents as a source of knowledge is often considered to be a more efficient strategy in developing designs than initiating a project from tabula rasa. Some architects often explicitly make use of design precedents and others less explicitly both ways frequently lead to efficient, effective, and/or innovative results.'<sup>8</sup>

Context can be considered as one of the best sources of knowledge to help architect design something new that will correspond with its surroundings and become an integral part of the city. In 'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance', Kenneth Frampton put forward theory to help consider the relationship between new architecture and its context. He believed that designers should make a critical response, rather than a sentimental or copyist response, to local design traditions. Frampton insisted that the building must reflect the culture and tradition of its region through its design and materials.<sup>9</sup>

The city of Rome is defined by its landscape. Traditionally Rome is said to be founded on seven hills. Today the characteristic features of the terrain are not as striking for the visitor as they were in ancient times or even 120 years ago. Rome managed to overcome the landscape with its architecture. The city is riddled with steep slopes, stairs and retaining walls, elevated parks (like the garden of Villa Aldobrandini or Giardini di Montecavallo). These tools are used to 'frame' the natural landscape, to turn it into the architecture of the city.

*In the case of Rome, the historical stratification of its composition elements represents that moment in time when the form of the city was strictly related to its landscape. From their high position, the villas transform the landscape in an open-air theatre and the low-lying city into a stage.*

Earliest and most impressive examples of such 'framing' of the landscape are the Domus Tiberiana and the Trajan Market. Domus Tiberiana on the northwest sector of the Palatine has retaining walls carved with niches that form an artificial landscape of the Palatine Hill. Under Domitian the facade towards the Forum was reconstructed, completing the new front with a long loggia and transforming the Domus into a sort of offshoot of the great Palazzo which was built on the hilltop.<sup>10</sup> The whole structure gives an impression that it's carved into the hill itself.

Trajan Market was built as an integral part of Trajan's Forum and nestled against the excavated flank of the Quirinal Hill. Between the Capitol and Quirinal there runs a narrow ridge which was at the same height as the column of Trajan. The ridge was cleared away, thus the landscape was radically reshaped. A slope came into being which was supported by the market buildings.

Another example from an Ancient Rome time, which is much closer to the Mira Lanza site, is the Emporium of Testaccio. In the Imperial Roman era huge warehouses—*horrea* in Latin—were built along the banks of the Tiber in what is now called Testaccio. There are a few partial structures remaining today, but they barely hint at the hundreds of thousands of square feet of multistoried, arch-roofed repositories that once existed for grain, wine, olive oil, marble and other imports. The Emporium was the river port of the ancient Rome that rose

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<sup>8</sup> Use and adaptation of precedents in architectural design. K. Moraes Zarzar. Delft University Press. 2003

<sup>9</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>10</sup> The Domus Tiberiana on the Palatine [www.assorestauo.org](http://www.assorestauo.org) (+image credit)

approximately between the Aventine Hill and the Testaccio Hill.<sup>11</sup> It frames the ascent from the river to the warehouses where the goods were stored. Today the ruins of the Emporium remain as a reminder of how the river was connected to the city before the erection of retaining walls of new river banks.

'When they could, Romans altered the natural topography of the site. When they could not, urban street networks represent the compromise between available transportation technology and the shape of the landscape.'<sup>12</sup>

Spanish Steps, in turn, were designed after generations of long and glowing discussions about how to urbanize the steep slope on the side of the Pincian Hill in order to connect it to the church. The final key was the one proposed by Francesco De Sanctis: a great staircase decorated with many garden-terraces.<sup>13</sup>

These are some of the 'design precedents' that Rome has to offer. Its landscape shaped the city resulting in countless different and exciting places, that were designed as solutions to connect the different levels of the city. These precedents are a guide to be considered in subsequent similar circumstances.

Precedents can be also viewed as urban 'pattern' in a sense, which Christopher Alexander described in his book 'The Timeless Way of Building'. Design pattern is re-usable form of a solution to a design problem. It is a set of relationships, which can be realized using different materials and geometries.

## 2.2 Reuse.

In chapter 2.1 the idea of precedents that can be considered for future reference in design is put forward, which is in a way a form of reclamation, reuse of the ideas that the city holds. In this chapter the 'adaptive reuse' will be discussed – reclamation an old site or building for a purpose other than which it was built or designed for. This also brings us back to chapter 1, where possibility to transform residual architecture or leftover space is discussed ('the cultural past remains dead if it is nothing but treasured').

*'People are happiest in buildings where change occurs at every scale from weeks to centuries. Such buildings are fractals in time.'*(Stewart Brand) Preserving a building and its function may be acceptable under circumstances relating to extraordinary historical events, but not for the vast majority of existing structures.<sup>14</sup>

Whilst old buildings become unsuitable for their programmatic requirements, as progress in technology, politics and economics moves faster than the built environment, adaptive reuse comes in as a sustainable option for the reclamation of sites. In many situations, the types of buildings most likely to become subjects of adaptive reuse include: industrial buildings, as cities become gentrified and the process of manufacture moves away from city; political buildings, such as palaces and buildings which cannot support current and future visitors of the site; and community buildings such as churches or schools where the use has changed over time.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> H. Honour; J. F. Fleming, *The Visual Arts: A History*, Revised Edition. 1995, Canada. Pearson Education

<sup>12</sup> Roman Urban Street Networks: Streets and the Organization of Space in Four Cities

<sup>13</sup> Wikipedia. Piazza di Spagna.

<sup>14</sup> S. Brand. *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built*. Viking Press, 1994

<sup>15</sup> Wikipedia

It is safe to assume that architects will have to deal increasingly with the transformation and adaptation of the built environment. Today, the role of architecture is being re-defined due to demographic, economic and ecological challenges. Transition and reuse take central stage in the practice and theory of the profession.

This theme was explored in Spain's 'Unfinished' exhibition for the 2016 Venice Biennale. It explores reuse of the abandoned structures which completion or maintenance was discovered not to be economically viable. The 'Unfinished' exhibition, presented in the Spanish pavilion at the Biennale, seeks to direct attention to processes more than results in an attempt to discover design strategies generated by an optimistic view of the constructed environment. The projects presented in this exhibition show an understanding of the lessons that the recent past can offer; it presents architecture as something unfinished, in a constant state of evolution and truly in the service of humanity.<sup>16</sup>

'Cities need old buildings so badly it is probably impossible for vigorous streets and districts to grow without them. By old buildings I mean not museum-piece old buildings, not old buildings in an excellent and expensive state of rehabilitation—although these make fine ingredients—but also a good lot of plain, ordinary, low-value old buildings, including some rundown old buildings.'<sup>17</sup>

Industrial buildings are remnants of anonymous and vernacular architecture serving a functional purpose rather than a theoretical one. Many industrial buildings were historically ignored, unlike country homes, palaces, and castles which early preservationists valued for their associations with famous people or significant historical events. The neglect of industrial buildings by some in the preservation community confirms that they have long been, and still are, considered by many to be a nuisance and an eyesore. They are often overlooked due to their blighted surroundings, polluted landscape, and 'ordinary' architecture. Such a belief ignores the rich architectural detailing, character-defining features, and unique public spaces often created in industrial complexes.<sup>18</sup>

It is widely accepted that abandoned properties attract vandals, homeless, arsonists, and drug dealers, and as a result drive down property values, taxes, and services, and discourage investment in a community.<sup>19</sup> Vacant and abandoned properties impose numerous social costs upon the local jurisdictions within which they are located. In addition to reducing property values and property tax revenue and attracting crime, they 'strain the resources of local police, fire, building, and health departments.'<sup>20</sup> These are the social costs of vacant properties.

Advantages of reuse primarily are focused on three aspects: environmental sustainability, preservation of history/social significance and economic benefits. Adaptive reuse of old structures and areas considerably reduces the consumption of energy that usually comes with demolition of

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<sup>16</sup> [www.archdaily.com](http://www.archdaily.com)

<sup>17</sup> *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs, 1961

<sup>18</sup> S.F Cantell. e *Adaptive Reuse of Historic Industrial Buildings: Regulation Barriers, Best Practices and Case Studies*. 2005

<sup>19</sup> S. Chambers. *New Law Helps Group Buy, Restore Vacant Properties*. 2004

<sup>20</sup> J. Schilling. *Vacant Properties: Revitalization Strategies*. 2002

buildings and erection of new structures to replace them. While many adaptive reuse projects do include further construction, the amount of energy for the extra work will be considerably less than that would require a completely new building.

Keeping and reusing historic buildings has long-term benefits for the communities that value them. When done well, adaptive reuse can restore and maintain the heritage significance of a building and help to ensure its survival. Rather than falling into disrepair through neglect or being rendered unrecognizable, heritage buildings that are sympathetically recycled can continue to be used and appreciated.

With today's rising costs of energy, reducing energy consumption from adaptive reuse directly translates to large financial savings. There is also savings to be had from reusing existing materials and lessening waste.<sup>21</sup>

### 2.3 Urban Strategy or Framework.

The urban design framework focuses on the broad scale and the long term, and sets an overall planning and design context within which more detailed and localized strategies, studies and projects can emerge. Urban design is shaping the physical setting for life in cities, towns and villages; it is the art of making places; design in an urban context. Urban design involves the design of buildings, groups of buildings, spaces and landscapes, and the establishment of frameworks and processes that facilitate successful development.

'Both in urban planning and in architectural structures the rate of change is becoming faster. A building is designed for a particular function, but then the user moves out, a new user comes along with different functional requirements and needs a new structure.'<sup>22</sup>

In 'KCAP. Situation Interview' Kees Christiaanse states the need for a framework with set rules in order to make the design process flexible, to give more freedom.

The concept of setting rules in order to give more freedom was also explored by Rem Koolhaas in 'Delirious New York' when talking about the Manhattan grid. 'The Grid's two-dimensional discipline also creates undreamt of freedom for three-dimensional anarchy. The Grid defines a new balance between control and de-control in which the city can be at the same time ordered and fluid, a metropolis of rigid chaos.'<sup>23</sup>

But in case of New York grid was not intended to be a result of urban design process, rather it was the result of the 'overwhelming urban activity', of financial benefit, advocated by its authors as facilitating the "buying, selling and improving of real estate".<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, New York grid became the power that organizes the chaos of thousands different elements that are competing between each other.

However, the grid is heavily criticized because it's placing utilitarianism over aesthetic qualities. The grid also foreshadowed the modernist architectural paradigm that form should follow function. It is now compared with prison bars that hold the architecture of the city. But grid also comes to stand as strange synchronicity of order and disorder. In fact, as Bauman argues, 'the grid didn't

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<sup>21</sup> superdraft.com.au

<sup>22</sup> KCAP. Situation Interview. NAI Publishers, Rotterdam.

<sup>23</sup> Rem Koolhaas. Delirious New York. 1978

<sup>24</sup> Rem Koolhaas. Delirious New York. 1978

make urban space uniform, easy to read and safe to move through. It soon turned into a matrix for heterogeneity, a canvas onto which a variety of city dwellers was yet to embroider its own, unplanned and erratic designs'.<sup>25</sup>

It means that urban grid can be perceived either as a result of planning activity, inconsiderate to the factors of the city, or as a pervasive force that controls the uncontrollable diversity of the city structures, depending on a case. The second argument implies the aesthetical qualities of the grid as a sharp contrast between the beauty of order, conjured by mind, and the lure of chaos, conceived by everyday life.

Today, before urbanists proceed to design the plan for any part of the city, neighborhood or urban block, there is a need to make a strategy that is based on interdisciplinary input with balanced representation of multiple fields including engineering, ecology, local history, and transport planning. Urban design strategy is not, however, just the sum of these parts, it absorbs all the demands and produces the unique solution that is based on, but is not limited to these factors; the final product is not a particular urban plan, but a vision for further development.

The relationship between public and private is one of the big factors that are shaping the urban environment. 'The historical merit of the nineteenth century is not that the classic block exists in the modern-day city, but the complex gradation between public and private. This ambiguity with mysterious inner worlds that take precedence over private space constitutes the quint-essence of nineteenth-century urban planning architecture. We try to incorporate into our urban planning and architecture the spatial sequencing from outside to inside and the ephemeral feeling that this creates.'<sup>26</sup>

This relationship between public and private lies at the center of many systems of stratification and classification. Some have studied the physical structures of the city to understand the typology of buildings, or how the places, buildings and routs are shaped and used. Others have studied the forms of activity and functional organization in the city, to understand the patterns of land use and spatial structure. Other studies have concentrated on the patterns of social and cultural differentiation in the city, how uneven distribution of resources and economic and social polarization characterize a city, or how different groups create different cultural identities.<sup>27</sup>

'In a Society becoming steadily more privatized with private homes, cars, computers, offices and shopping centers, the public component of our lives is disappearing. It is more and more important to make the cities inviting, so we can meet our fellow citizens face to face and experience directly through our senses. Public life in good quality public spaces is an important part of a democratic life and a full life.' – Jan Gehl.

Life between buildings has become Jan Gehl's major focus of study and work. By starting with public life and the areas in which it takes place, building design becomes a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Gehl emphasizes that life between buildings is a dimension of architecture that deserves more careful treatment. It is where social interaction and perception, urban recreation, and the sensory experience of city life take place. By emphasizing the urban

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<sup>25</sup> Chronotopes of the Uncanny: Time and Space in Postmodern New York Novels. P. Eckhard. 2011

<sup>26</sup> KCAP. Situation Interview. NAI Publishers, Rotterdam.

<sup>27</sup> Public and Private Spaces of the City. A. Madanipour. 2003



structure – the space between buildings, – Jan Gehl reverses the common belief of the superior role of the buildings over the urban design; he highlights the framework that composes the city.

'In an urban area a successful strategy based on 'freedom in a framework' will support growth and mobility.'<sup>28</sup> An urban framework is the proposed vision for the city informed by investigations of the existing conditions and responding to these sensitively and considerately. As a process, it remains highly complex, but has the potential to communicate basic concepts of our relationship to place.

### Chapter 3. Elaboration.

In this chapter I will elaborate on the themes described in chapter 2: historical evidence and urban precedent, adaptive reuse of abandoned buildings, urban strategy and public space.

When designing a building, context of its immediate surroundings is very important, but when designing a big urban block such as Mira Lanza, it's also important to take into consideration the context of the city. Placing the design for the new development for the area within a context of architecture of Rome, based on historical evidence, is a way to connect the currently introverted site to the city life of Rome.

Mira Lanza has some special features, beside what was built in the area, that define it: the position of the site in the immediate proximity to the river and it's ground level, which is around 4 meters under the normal street level. Chapter 2.1 researched the historical evidence that Rome has to offer. These architectural precedents in the city, architecture that frames the landscape, can be used as a reference to connect Mira Lanza to the city and to the Tiber River. Emporium of Testaccio and ancient retaining walls are of great interest when considering the connection to the river. At the moment, river bank is a sloped wall twelve meters high. The low level of Mira Lanza is additionally sheltered from the river by a higher street that goes along it. This condition arouses an idea to carve a set of connections directly from the river to the area under the street, creating similar effect as from the Emporium which seems like it was carved into the ascending landscape to the warehouses of Testaccio; or as from Domus Tiberiana, that frames the Palatine Hill.

Another feature of Rome is its historical development where newer architecture was built upon the old. In chapter 2.2 the reuse of older structures, reclamation of the existing buildings is discussed. In the area of Mira Lanza there are still remains of an old factory. A few buildings stand in ruins while some of them are reclaimed by creative class. It is important to preserve this industrial heritage, as, even though the old buildings might not have been a remarkable piece of architecture during the time they were built, the area can still hold a cultural significance because of the memories the community associates with it.

But what would be the right direction to take with a large urban block, such as Mira Lanza? It is a huge territory that requires an approach on an urban scale. Instead of designing the territory, as one would design a building, there is a need to establish a strategy first.

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<sup>28</sup> [www.gehlpeople.com](http://www.gehlpeople.com)

'In urban terms, what's always exciting are those spaces in which unexpected things can happen, where user groups develop in a way that wasn't pre-planned. These are indications that the building or district is infected with pre-program uses, that it can be used in a way that has not been predicted.'<sup>29</sup>

In chapter 2.3 the need for the urban framework is established as to give a way for future development, for the occurrence of 'unexpected'.

It is not necessary the need for the urban plan; but something that will set the designed 'rules' which will define the new vision for the area.

Notion of the relationship between public and private space is also not accidental. The atmosphere, that is present in Mira Lanza today, is very intimate and theatrical; old industrial buildings with the imposing presence of the Gazometro on the background.

Combined with the notion of different levels and the urge to make the area open to the public, but for it to also retain the intimate atmosphere, the idea to divide the planes of public and private came into being.

The size of the area inclines to take into consideration the need to organize the space by dividing it into several parts. The grid was discussed in chapter 2.2 and it is not only a convenient planning method, but also a design tool to organize the place where countless possibilities can occur.

In this case we get a project of urban grid, that connects the streets on the opposite sides of the area, from the openings of housing blocks on the west side to the river banks on the east. But on the area itself, due to the low plane of the site, the grid is no longer a set of streets, it is no longer on the ground level, instead, it rather forms the structure that is elevated from the area. In this case the grid can be viewed as the design solution of the site's features. It forms a set of public 'bridges' that cross the area in different directions.

The grid also forms 'cells' inside the area, some of which would be already filled with existing structures. Rem Koolhaas, when talking about the Manhattan grid, stated 'It follows that one form of human occupancy can only be established at the expense of another. The city becomes a mosaic of episodes, each with its own particular life span, that contest each other through the medium of the Grid.'<sup>30</sup> Which in the context of Mira Lanza imply the equality of the cells and its content – the old factory buildings and new buildings, that are going to emerge in the other parts of the area.

This is an abstract representation of my urban design strategy – the grid as an architectural object, that divides the planes of upper public walkway and bottom more intimate space. It also divides the area into 'cells' that would be connected with stairs and slopes to the walkway and to each other, creating different unexpected scenarios. Ultimately, the set of this semi-public cells would slowly lead to the river itself.

This was conceived as a result of research on historical evidence of 'framing' the landscape of Rome, of intention to preserve the existing buildings and atmosphere of the area, and of research of contemporary discourse on urban design.

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<sup>29</sup> KCAP. Situation Interview. NAI Publishers, Rotterdam.

<sup>30</sup> Rem Koolhaas. Delirious New York. 1978

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