

# The role of 'great events' in the urban transformations of Rome

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## Short outline

Rome is characterised by projects, events, episodes, forces, interests, interrelated in time and space, that eventually have conditioned its fate. Starting from these assumptions and from some keys of interpretation (powers, events and planning) the paper shows that "the eternal city" represents an emblematic case, albeit in its evident specificity, of the so-called 'pulsar effect' applied to the urban transformations.

Rhythmic impulses generating transformations upon the city, whose reverberations can determine outcomes impacting on the fate of an urban community, represent the challenge, the metaphor borrowed from astrophysics and offered to our reflections. The concept of 'pulsar effect', transferred to the discipline of urban planning, evokes a multiplicity of interpretations related to different cultural settings and specific local conditions.

The urban history of Rome is characterised by projects, events, episodes, forces and interests, interrelated in time and space that eventually have conditioned its fate. Starting from these assumptions, the purpose is to show that Rome, "the eternal city", represents an emblematic case, albeit in its evident specificity, of the so-called 'pulsar effect' applied to the urban transformations. The arguments that support this thesis can be found in the recent exceptional events that suggest some possible interpretations.

## Interpretation keys

The two recent events, the Great Jubilee 2000 and the new city plan 2002, allow the identification of some keys for the interpretation of the 'pulsar effect', applied to the Roman events.

One key concerns the coexistence in the city of two identities: Rome as the core of its political and territorial dominion and Rome as the centre of Christianity. Two souls at the same time: the first as the site of the state power, the second as the spiritual as well as temporal centre of the religious power (namely of a phenomenon of global cultural dimension).

The dialogue of this bipolarism (from alternation to coexistence, from conflict to co-operation) represents the background of the big events, the *big bang* underlying the choices and the impact on the evolution of the urban structure of Rome in its history. Its stratification is indissolubly linked with the role played by the dominant actors and the corresponding models of government as guarantors of the generative, structuring process of the city. History shows us the will and the character of self-representation of the Caesars, the Pontiffs, or more recently, of the kings of Italy in Rome's Capital city and of Mussolini, the "Duce"; the all expressed their absolute power through the great 'urban projects' which represent the peaks of extraordinary changes translating the dominant political personality into real forms.

A second key of interpretation could be represented by the episodic implementation of plans in the city development and the separation between the pre-established arrangements and the events that operate the transformations of the urban space; planning evolution in Rome shows that the plan provisions are usually not able to settle the conflicts between the community and the subjects whose interests are often contrasting. Consequently, the adoption of a plan becomes an exceptional occurrence. That's the reason why only few were approved for the city since 1870, when Rome became the Capital of the Italian Kingdom.

The history of Rome can be read through its plans and their failures, a series of 'missed pulsar effects' announced but never implemented because lacking the urban arena

consensus, the socio-economic assumptions and allocated financial support. A number of episodes of Rome city planning of the twentieth century are actually 'interventional peaks', promoted by the political dirigisme as a 'variant' to the approved plan.

Considering the relationship based on a conflicting dialogue between great event and master plan, the last 50 years of Rome's expansion can also be explained: the "PRG" (master plan) 1962 with the creation of a new eastern strong axis (a CBDs system), out of the consolidated city, an urban event vainly waited for decades; the new plan 2002 that incorporates the "programmi integrati" for the urban renewal of peripheries and the "progetti urbani", that are the new planning tools produced by the exchange relationship between the owners of the transformable land (state railways or real estate corporations) and the local administrations.

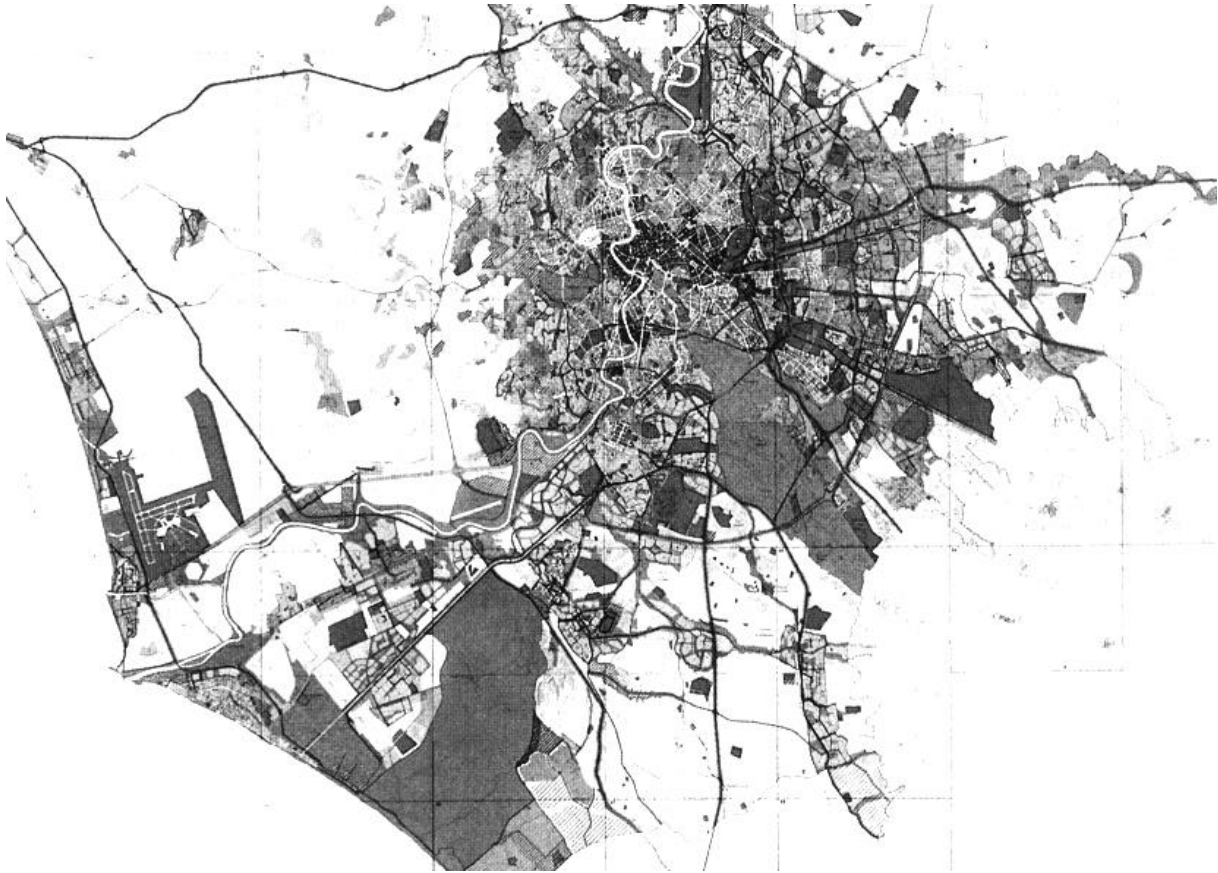
The following part of the paper is divided into two points: the first concerning some of the great events after the Second World War that significantly transformed the city; the second regarding the most recent event, the great Jubilee of the Second Millennium. All these events<sup>1</sup> related to the ordinary planning.

### **"Esposizione Universale E42" and Olympic Games 1960**

Going back from the present days to the period of fascism and the immediate after-war of the forties, the effects of some significant events are clearly observable in Rome, that just in those years reached 1 million inhabitants.

The most significant events were: the creation of E42, with which Mussolini intended to show to the world the results of his politics; the creation of the "via Olimpica" for the 1960 Olympic Games, an infrastructure to the West of the city for direct connection of the sports facilities North of Rome (Foro Italico) to those South of Rome (EUR facilities- formerly E42).

In those years, a new city plan, the 1931 plan, came into force and in particular, the first modern national law for urban planning was promulgated. But while this was a new event, addressed to the future and the 1931 city plan was an 'experimentation', or better a 'promise', concerning the existing city alone, the E42 and the 1960 Olympic Games were based on concrete allocation of funds and a precise schedule of implementation. They greatly transformed the city with their choices, while the new 1931 plan ignored them, if not even contradicted them. Similarly, the "via Olimpica" in 1960 fully contradicted the new city plan of 1962 (conceived and always defended by Luigi Piccinato). This plan provided for the city eastwards development, with the famous "asse attrezzato" and the CBDs, never implemented, and limited the westwards development of the infrastructural system, just the opposite of what the "via Olimpica" was planned for.



*The 1962 Rome Master Plan. The darker strip (North-South oriented) on the right side of the image represents the "asse attrezzato".*

The creation of E42 followed an autonomous course from the cultural view-point as well as in its implementation; it was apparently unrelated to the debate about the future city planning of Rome.

After the war, for the first time, the expansion of Rome south-westwards, that is, towards the sea, was proposed. The efficacious slogan "Roma al mare" (Rome toward the sea) launched by Mussolini some years before, had a rapid diffusion. When in 1936 it was decided that Rome was going to be the venue of the Universal Exposition to be held in 1942, at the end of the debate that accompanied the proposals, the choice among the alternative locations led to decide in favour of an area south of Rome.

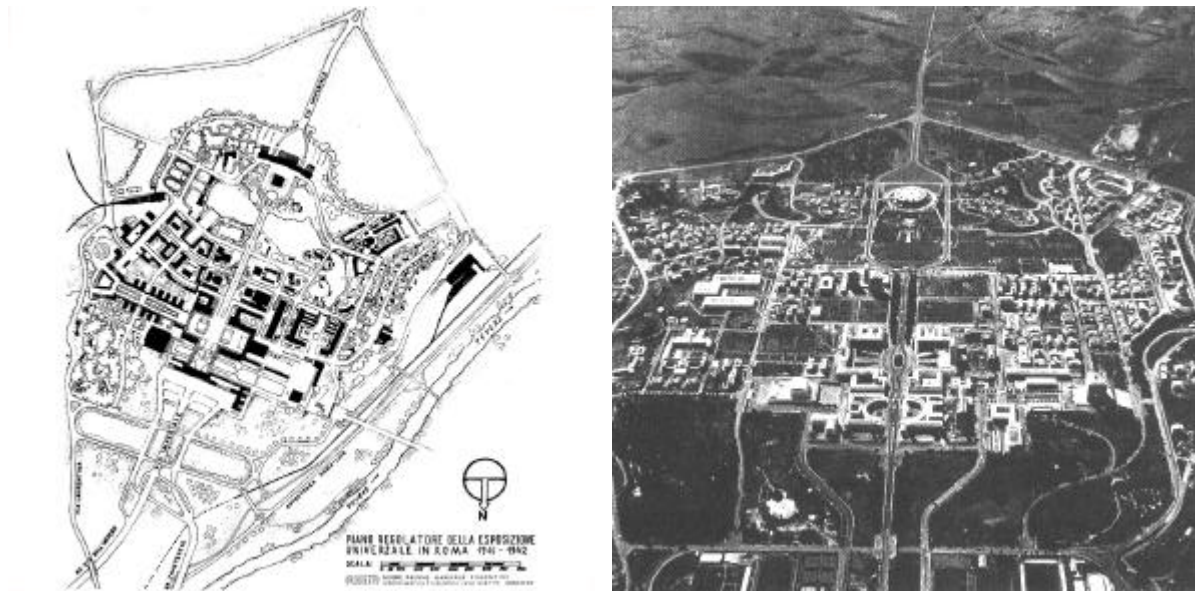
The official ideal motivations were to implement at the end of the exposition a large monumental district that could give the sensation of the "renewed Italian soul". It should have appeared in "prosecution and connection ... with the monumental core of Rome, as to indicate a spiritual continuum of thought, aspiration and achievement".

The consistency of the choice at the planning level could have occurred if the 1931 plan, in force at that time, would have included strategic options for the city development, but it was not so. On the contrary, the 'choice' of the plan was of an undifferentiated rapid spread, that is, no choice at all. Moreover, speculative real estate interests were concentrating, following the decision to locate the exposition in the ample, completely deregulated south-western sector of Roman territory, between the E42 area and the sea.

Therefore, it should be considered that the E42 location was a precise urban choice oriented and guided, apart from technical reasons, by more solid economic and speculative reasons in favour of the great real estate properties. The venue could completely ignore the city plan that some kilometres northwards, concerned the consolidated city to be expanded

and chose the 'void', preventing possible hindrances and restraints the plan might have represented, and adopting the only implementation mechanism of executive plans.

Considering the whole set of forces and interests that became aggregated in the building process of E42, it is readily understood that the interruption, due to the rapid passage of the war through Rome that involved also the huge construction site of the aborted exposition, represented only an accidental pause and that the interests, not merely of real estate and speculative, would have immediately reappeared more vigorously, once the storm was over.



*On the left: the first plan of E42 (1938). On the right: aerial view of the EUR district (1961).*

The exposition area had become a permanent element of the new Rome topography and the strategic design it was part of, had attained only the first goals: the preparations for the development. Nobody could grant what the after-war of Rome would be, but EUR did exist and if considered in relation to Rome and its territory of influence, it appeared bound to become, in the immediate future, the major factor as well as the major urban problem. And this was what promptly occurred.

The plan of the Olympic Games, prepared well in advance from 1951, allowed to strengthen the EUR development programs and to implement the provisions of the new city plan before its approval on July 1962 under particular circumstances, throughout a very complex process that lasted approximately four years.

The structuring element determined by this occasional instrument for the Olympic Games was the construction of the "via Olimpica", whose consequence was the reinforcement of the city north-western sector and its connection with E42 called EUR (Esposizione Universale di Roma). The implementation of the eastern system provided for by the scheme of the new city plan but which did not concern the Olympic Games, was postponed indefinitely.

The declared reason for the construction of the "via Olimpica", an important traffic road, was the direct communication of the sport equipments equitably distributed between EUR, South of Rome, and the Flaminio neighbourhood to the North. The consequences were the definitive stabilization of EUR and the upgrading of the districts it crossed (Prati, Trionfale, Gianicolense, etc.).

The "Palazzo dello Sport" (sports building), the "Piscina delle Rose" (swimming pool), the velodrome, the athletics facilities were built at the EUR; in the North, at the Flaminio, the

Olympic village, the Corso Francia viaduct – a new access to Rome from Via Cassia and Flaminia – were built.



*Sport equipments and Olympic Village at Flaminio neighbourhood.*

When on July 1962, the new city plan was approved, the events had already made it obsolete and on October 1967 the municipality adopted a “variante generale” necessary for the rearrangement of all variants meanwhile intervened. At the beginning of the 70s, it was opened a long phase of permanent conflicts on the case by case choices proposed or imposed by the winning forces. The real estate interest met by weaker and weaker resistance the indifference and disengagement of the antagonist forces that had fought for the introduction of social instances in the city plan of Rome.

### **The jubilee: powers and plan**

The great Jubilee of 2000, for a number of reasons, was welcomed with special emphasis by the different institutions deputed to plan the celebrations. First of all the Roman Catholic Church that intended to stress the exceptional event of particular ecumenical significance, for the first time concomitant with the dawn of the new millennium.



*Zenithal view of Saint Peter's Church, Vatican City and the surrounding urban area.*

At the same time, the lay institutions from the central government to the local authorities focused their interest on the Holy Year with different strategies and goals. The allocations of funds at the national level, assigned by some specific provisions of the law<sup>2</sup> intended to favour works not only in the territory of Lazio (mostly located in the municipality of Rome and managed by a specific Agency) but also in the other Italian regions crossed by the historical routes of the jubilee.

For the municipal administration it was a challenge to launch again the strategies of urban transformation at short term and tackle in practice the operational phase after the disappointment for the missed assignment in extremis of the 2004 Olympic Games (as it is well-known in favour of Athens).

Beyond the undebatable financial commitment<sup>3</sup> and the criteria that guided the definition of the sectors of intervention, it is interesting to consider the planning and management of the event in light of the dialectics among the powers operating in the city and expressing the relative planning strategies.

Separately taken, the main sector of intervention, namely cultural heritage, mobility and reception facilities, showed a substantial continuity and consistency with the historical tradition of the jubilee, intended as an ecumenical pilgrimage where the system of reception facilities plays a primary role.

The setting where the urban transformations for the Holy Year of the second millennium seemed to take place, was characterized by convergent goals and a substantial co-operation between the lay power of the Italian institutions (state, region, province, municipality) and the religious power of the Church.

However the 'occult pivot' of the operations was shown to be still entrusted to the Vatican, as proven by the advantageous cost/benefit ratio and the resolution to its benefit of the thorny controversy on the timely implementation of some interventions<sup>4</sup>.

The success and beneficial effects on the 'system City', especially for some sectors of intervention are self-evident.



*Saint John Basilica and the church square restored.*

Based on an high standard tradition, with no equals world-wide, the restoration and upgrading of the historical, architectural and monumental wealth, profited from the pulsar effect of the Jubilee to accelerate a trend already present since some years. In fact, with new sources of funding as the lotteries, the Ministry of "Beni Culturali" (Cultural Heritage) could overcome the chronic impasse of the lack of financial resources with the inauguration of a new season of upgrading of the huge historical wealth of our country, where the territory of the Capital certainly represents the maximal expression<sup>5</sup>.



*Pilgrims' meetings in Saint Peter square during the Jubilee 2000.*

The visitors' demand for reception facilities (estimated in approximately 25 millions in 2000 with 23% increase as compared to the previous year) was met by the relevant supply of religious and private accommodations plus 70,000 beds in hotels, principally addressed to the mid-high level tourists (3 and 4/5 stars hotels) to the detriment of other categories of visitors (young pilgrims, coming from East European countries, etc.).

The major weak points of the event effect concerned the infrastructural interventions. In presence of a chronic gap between the demand of mobility and the offer of a roadnet and

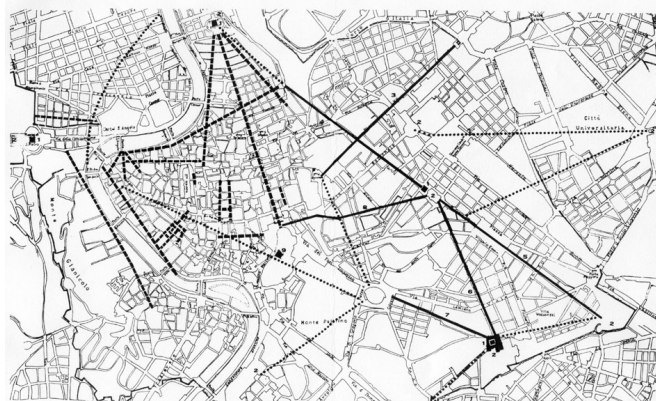
effective high standard transport systems, the pattern of the works for the Jubilee was shown to be unable to attain significant results at short-time, in relation to the ambitions the municipal administration expressed in drawing the new urban strategies.

Actually, the traffic problem represented the only point of explicit contact between the program of interventions for the Jubilee and the axes of the new plan the municipality of Rome was going to adopt after the works started in 1993. However, the start effect of implemented infrastructures seemed negligible in relation to the cost, complexity and commitment involved by the project of the new networks.

The access to the main destinations of the Jubilee did not result in the 'wishful' modal shift in favour of the train transport, at present still too discontinuous to represent the expected network effect. Apart from the valid restyling of the Termini Central railway station, the main urban train junctions (Tiburtina, Ostiense, San Pietro) might acquire the role of interconnection nodes, integrated activity poles and identity places only with the implementation at mid-term of the major projects concerning pertinent urban sites. The "J" bus line, activated for the occasion to connect the basilicas and main tourist destinations, remained largely underused for managerial problems, difficult interconnections, lack of information and tariff integration.

Apart from the allocation of funds for the celebrations of the Holy Year and the plan of "Roma Capitale" there was an evident gap between the contingency of infrastructural interventions, aimed only at the event, and the master plan, the municipal administration was developing at the same time.

As discussed up to this point, the recent scenario where the management of the event of the Holy Year took place, was characterized by a substantial co-operation between the lay and the religious powers of the city, based on a series of choices with complementary and convergent interests. However, looking at the past, the guide of the Jubilee events as accelerators of the city development, was almost exclusively taken up by the temporal power and the spiritual primate of the Church from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to 1870 (Rome, capital of Italy) <sup>6</sup>.



*The Pope Sisto V 'Master Plan' (end of XVI century), connecting the seven major Basilicas, also represented in the Lafrery's drawing*

### **Policies and events: open problems**

In contemporary urban policies, the growing diffusion in attracting mega-events is raising the problem of 'virtuous' planning and management of peaks and resulting effects. The indubitable 'start effect' value – provoked by the event and able to stimulate ideas, projects, resources, subjects and social debates, concentrating the interests of the various groups that animated the urban scene – could be the opportunity to positively accelerate the slow transformation processes and make decisive corrections to old strategies.

On the other hand, the use of the events could dramatically emphasize the trend to decline in the absence of an appropriate local policy. An event of an exceptional drawing value shows

its effectiveness if applied to a setting where the claims for projects and transformations take advantage of a solid cultural basis in terms of consensus, actors co-operation, participation, support to a shared development, maturation of tools and means for the management of the city plan cycle.

Consequently, it is important to situate the 'pulsar effect' in a 'virtuous system', able to translate the idea, the conceived vision into mature, shared forms, and to implement it within defined times. Programming and attributing the responsibilities become fundamental. The allocation of funds and the initial political will represent for Rome the necessary but not sufficient condition to translate the pulsar effect into results of quality.



*General framework of the new Rome Master Plan (municipal adoption foreseen before the end of 2002).*

## NOTES

1) Other 'minor' events – that had a definite impact on the urban transformation of Rome and on the life of its citizens, whose number was rapidly growing – can be observed in the seventies, eighties and nineties, while the most important phenomenon, especially in the 70s and 80s, was the slow continuous growth of an enormous periphery around the city, mostly formed by illegal buildings for which the government was later forced to resort to legalizations and remissions.

Among the other events to be mentioned there were: the jubilees, initially celebrated every 100 years, then every 50 years and, starting from 1470, every 25 years; the world sport games (World Athletics Olympics in 1980; the World-Cup Football in 1990); the international political summits and the summits of the UN organizations (FAO 1996 and 2002 etc).

2) Act n. 651/96 (financing of works inside Lazio Region) and Act n. 207/97 (financing of works outside Lazio Region).

3) The two Acts, indicated in the previous note, allocated 1,8 billions Euro for direct interventions; in addition, 3,5 billions Euro came from public and private investments.

4) In particular, we are referring to the construction of the multi-storey parking under the Gianicolo hill, close to Saint Peter Basilica, directly linked with the new short tunnel under the lungotevere (road along the river Tiber). This work was supervised by the Mayor of Rome (at the same time the Chief of the Governmental Jubilee Commission), who strongly pushed for its completion, in conflict with the Historic Archaeological Monument Office, because of the discovery of the of some imperial villa ruins (II century a.C.).

5) Among the most significant works we can find:

- the beautiful restoration of the major basilicas – leading these extraordinary pieces of architecture to the original beauty – and the 'urban maquillage' of the surrounding areas;
- the rehabilitation of the "Scuderie Papali" (pontifical stables), close to the Quirinale palace, hosting expositions at international level (design by Gae Aulenti);
- the excavation of some archeological areas, like "Foro di Cesare", "Foro di Traiano" and "Tempio della Pace", as well as the restoration and public access to monuments like "Tempio di Venere", "Torre delle Milizie", "Basilica di massenzio" and other great historical museums.

6) In spite of the specificity of the various historical moments, it is possible to find a sort of "fil rouge" showing the dialogic continuity between the events management and the government of urban development in Rome. If the Christian Jubilees, as the original Jewish celebrations, represent a concrete opportunity of renewal for the entire religious community, at the same time the image of the city had to favour this tension, pursuing the implementation of a new recognizable and qualitative image through an innovative and dynamic public space system. For instance, the realization during the renaissance and baroque centuries of numerous participations hinged on the valorisation of great monumental emergencies, pilgrimage goals during the Jubilee celebrations, answers cogently to a double objective: strengthening the prestige of the Pope image, renewing and enriching the city landscape impressing the visitors with all its greatness and beauty and – at the same time – fostering the flows and the acceptance of the pilgrims, facilitating their movements and alleviating their uncomfortable journeys through dignitous accommodations. In this sense, jubilee events and city development plans seem to cooperate, sometimes in explicit way, supported from an 'integrated vision' where the implementation of institutional policies is piloted through a wise osmosis between ordinary management and exceptional event.

From this point of view it can be interpreted the relationship between the policies introduced in the second half of XVI century with the so called "Visita alle Sette Chiese" (Visit to the Seven Churches) by Saint Filippo Neri (who invented for the first time the happy convergence between religious pilgrimage and cultural tourism) and the great urban plan promoted by Sisto V, assisted by his architect Domenico Fontana. The ambitious and scenographic system of great axes, connecting the most significant sites of the city, left a new imprinting on the urban morphology, favouring accessibility to the most attracting centers from a spiritual but also temporal point of view (basilicas, public squares, monumental emergencies, popular neighbourhoods, etc.).

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