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Why Romans Are Tearing Up the Via dei Fori Imperiali

ROME — If all roads lead to Rome, obviously the traffic will be fearful and, as everyone knows, it is. One solution has been to make such illustrious bottlenecks as the Forum di Spina into pedestrian zones. Another is a dusty and largely unapplied policy of decentralization. And yet another is simply to build a main road and, presumably, traffic that goes with it.

Early this spring work will begin on upgrading the Via dei Fori Imperiali, the artery between the Colosseum and the Piazza Venezia, between old and new Rome. It is rather as if the Avenue de l'Opera were to vanish. The reason for closing the road is cultural but the debate on the decision has been highly political: we are in Italy, where culture and politics are as close as Romulus and Remus.

The Via dei Fori Imperiali was laid down 50 years ago by Mussolini, allegedly so he could see the Colosseum from his balcony across town. To its south lies the widely visited Roman Forum of republican times and the partly excavated forum of Caesar. To its north lie the partly

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excavated forums of Trajan and Augustus. Underneath the road lie the invisible forums of Vespasian and Nerva. Once the road is removed, a spectacular archaeological dig will uncover the buried sections, beginning with the area around Trajan's Arch. (The Foro della Pace will for the time being be left buried and the road over it untouched.)

"The archaeological and historical interest of this operation is so great that we don't need any words to explain it. It is simply the center of imperial Rome," says Professor Adriano La Regina, Rome's superintendent of archaeology, a dour and tweedy man with a slightly Augustan haircut whose office is in the old Roman forum in over the Temple of Venus, which Hadrian designed.

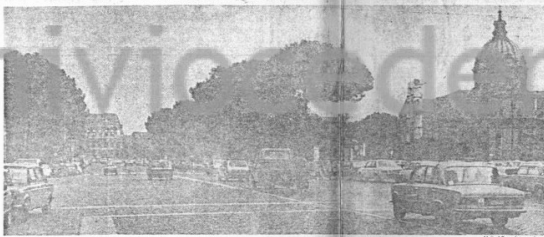
"The imperial forum was the business center as the Roman forum was in Republican times," La Regina says. The total excavation area will cover 37,200 square meters (3,500 square yards).

He expects the artistic level of the works that will be uncovered to be high, especially the parts around Trajan's forum, now covered by a children's garden, designed by Apollodorus of Damascus, whom La Regina calls the Michelangelo of his day. "Apollodorus criticized Hadrian's architectural ability and lost his head as a result," he says.

Excavations began in the Roman forum at the beginning of the last century. The imperial forums were then covered by old houses. Mussolini razed the houses to build the Via dei Fori Imperiali and its pedestrian green spaces. So no one except automobilists will be displaced by the excavations, and this, La Regina says, is an important consideration.

"It is no longer culturally acceptable to destroy something new just to find something older," he says.

He has already closed one street near the Capitoline to automobile traffic and says there were few objections. He is planning to revive ancient Roman pedestrian paths, notably one that will wind from the Arch of Constantine to the Capitoline, and he says he doesn't think tearing down the Via dei Fori Imperiali is all that important.



The Via dei Fori Imperiali, looking down to the Colosseum: "It is simply the center of imperial Rome."

"Most of the traffic on that road isn't heading for the center but crossing the center to get somewhere else," he says. "What we should do is move the big ministries out of the center of Rome and leave the center for those who live there or have cultural or professional or artistic activities there. After all, the center of Rome is very crowded and not very big.

How would he get bureaucrats to leave Rome? "If we cut the roads they'll have to move," he says.

The new excavations will probably take 15 years and are budgeted over the first five years at \$ billion lire, including restoration of existing ruins. The state pays for the excavations, the city of Rome is responsible for the rest. Work will begin as soon as city and state authorities give the go-ahead.

The excavations are not only of archaeological importance; they also involve urban renewal and evoke the greater problem of Rome's position as the nation's capital. Beautiful and cozy as Rome is, it does not have the liveliness or monumental dignity some people feel a national capital should have. "With the exception of Mussolini, no government ever tried to make Rome a capital worthy of its name," the city's Communist mayor has said. Among its needs are an auditorium, libraries and a municipal museum of modern art.

The city's erstwhile *alta cultura*, Renato Nicolini, says he can count on the fingers of one hand the important buildings that have gone up in Rome since the Risorgimento. Nicolini is the Jack Lang of Rome, even more youthful even more honest and cury, a lot more glib in debate. Since the national minister of culture is concerned mostly with conserving the nation's artistic heritage, the local cultural arena are far more important figures than might be expected and Nicolini, an architect by profession, is a superb voice-getter and polemicist who in six years in office has become a national figure.

While Nicolini might be expected to oppose the forum excavations in favor of more vital expressions of culture, he is enthusiastic about the dig. "I am not so interested in the imperial part," he says. He is a Communist. "But I am interested in what it will tell us about the life of medieval Rome."

Nicolini takes credit for making Rome's ancient ruins as familiar to Romans as they are to tourists. His program of Roman Summers has included all-night film shows in the Circus Maximus and in the Colosseum.

He also took over one of Rome's more elegant streets for a night of concerts in its churches, courtyards and palazzi. He has organized poetry readings and happenings and last New Year's Eve he expelled traffic from the Trastevere turned and inflated orchestra instead.

"The tunnel had degenerated into a noisy gas chamber," a former Mayor of Rome has said. "Using it as a ballroom was a brilliant way of fighting people's alienation."

Nicolini's cultural policy, which harks back to the ancient formula of bread and circuses, has been praised and criticized. He is in an apparently government state with the city's deputy mayor, a Socialist, who has complained, "the only way I hear about cultural affairs is through the newspapers." He has also been criticized by his own party: a Communist deputy says that rather than decentralize by bringing culture to the city's outlying districts, Nicolini is attracting people from the suburbs back already overcrowded central Rome.

The most common criticism is that rather than spend money on permanent institutions, Nicolini throws it away on fleeting events that are soon forgotten. He is known as the Eternal City's prince of ephemera.

"An event happens and then is forgotten," one musician says. "What is missing is a point of reference that would make a city like Rome an authentic cultural center."

Nicolini, it is said, has a chronic case of epiphany. One way to show he is unaffected is to back the excavations of the imperial forums: nothing is, symbolically, more enduring than archaeology. "It's important that the excavation be achieved in order to increase Rome's importance," Nicolini says in his office, sitting on a sofa in a black watch plaid jacket and gray velvet trousers and surrounded by admiring aides. "The more conservative forces don't like it because it involves an enormous change in the city."

In reply to charges that his activities are merely hollow display, Nicolini speaks of creating spectacular situations to meet particular needs. "The ephemeral means meetings, contacts, novelty," he says. "Everyone talks about the lack of cultural structures and I'm not going to deny it," he adds, pointing to the feeble cultural record of the Christian Democrats during their long ascendancy. "In the last six years we have made things move."

The Socialist deputy mayor says that Nicolini has literally made a spectacle of the city. Others, of varying political affiliations, argue that this is not necessarily a bad thing. Only a few years ago, they point out, the activities of the Red Brigades and other terrorist groups made citizens stay at home, terrified behind drawn curtains. Nicolini has got them to stroll again in their city on a summer evening and that in itself, some say, is a triumph. "He gave faith back to the people of Rome, and the taste to recognize their city," one commentator wrote.

Since culture and politics are so inseparable — the recent fall of the government of the city of Florence has been in part attributed to disagreement over theater policy — the fact that on the centenary of Mussolini's birth one of his major roadworks will disappear in order to uncover the true Roman heritage is not without significance. And while Nicolini's flair for spectacle may have its damnable side, it perhaps shows that he understands Romans better than his more sober-sided critics.

"He has made Rome back into one vast theater," says a prominent architect. "That's what it always has been and should be."