

POLYTECHNIC OF TORINO  
FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE 2  
Degree in Architecture  
**Honors theses**

---

**Consequences of the great fire of Rome on the urban development of ancient Rome: the role of the *insula* in the planning of *Nova Urbs***

by Francesca Rossotti

Tutor: Donatella Ronchetta

Which is and which has been the meaning of “to live in” for the human being is one of the most important questions that every architect is asked to answer.

The idea of privacy finds its spatial dimension into the house; the way in which this space is thought or perceived is the witness of a specific way of living. [..]

Then the house is the most intimate and private expression of architecture and, at the same moment, is the main tool of the urban planning. That's the key theme of his research.

I've decided to challenge with this graduate thesis thanks to my passion for archaeology and for ancient history and to the idea that nothing, in architecture or in our world, is made by chance.

***RESEARCH TARGET***

The target of this research has been the historical fact known as “the Nero's fire” that took place in 64 A.C and the consequences that the reconstruction plans of the Emperor had on the planning of a new form for the city and on the development of new shapes for domestic buildings.

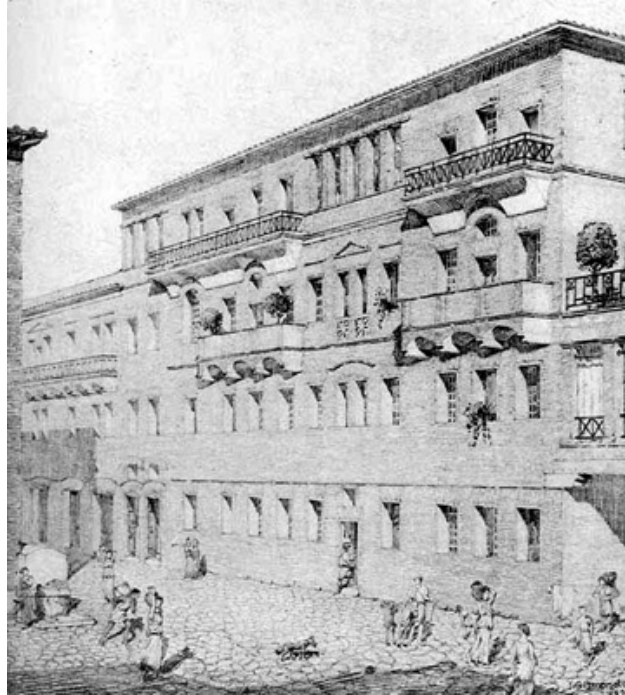
My specific attention has been paid on the role of the new residential buildings, the *insula*, in the creation of a *Nova Urbs* (*Nova Urbs* is the word used by Tacitus in *Annales*, XV, 38, to describe the ambitious urban plan of the Emperor Nero) dreamt by Nero.

***RESEARCH FIELDS***

In order to understand the urban consequences of the Fire and the ideological strength of the imperial plans it has been necessary to analyze of the urbanistic, social, architectural and political background of the imperial Rome of I century A.C. (the chronological limits of my analysis are identified with the Reign of August till the Great Rome of Emperor Trajan).

The fields concerned in this research have been:

- The role of the living attitudes and its models in the roman world.
- Building and urban laws before Nero's achievement and the role of the Emperor' changes in the Roman Law.
- The urban development of the city of Rome from its origin to the reign of Nero.
- The daily life in the city of Rome, described through the words of important authors as Cicerone, Marziale, Giovenale and Petronio.



Gismondi, reconstruction of the Diana's House, Ostia (A.D.A.)

- The critical analysis on the character of Emperor Nero: now described as a great figure in the political and social background of the Empire he has been charged as a mad, cruel and insane man.
- The introduction of the *Insula* as the strong element for the planning of the *Nova Urbs*: as the main theme of my Thesis this aspect has been made deeper with many visits in Rome and researches in the archives of the city ( mainly at the DAI, *Deutsche Archaeologische Institut*, and ADA, *Archivio di Documentazione Archeologica della Soprintendenza di Roma*) and to the direct study of the fragments of the oldest map of Ancient Rome ( so called *Forma Urbis*).



Fragment 011 of Forma Urbis Romae, on courtesy of the Stanford University "The Stanford Digital Forma Urbis Romae Project", CA, USA and the Soprintendenza Archeologica of Rome

Particular attention has been paid to the role of the pre-existent building technique known as *opus caementicium* in the planning of new shapes and new buildings for the people and the city of Rome during Nero's reign.

Excavation witnesses founded at Rome and Ostia (actually the archeological evidences of Ostia are the best comparison tool in the study of the ancient Rome since Ostia has been best preserved from time and damages) have allowed me to analyze a good number of *insulae* in the aim to support my reading of their role in the urban development of Rome.



Virtual reconstruction of the Diana's House, Ostia

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This work has allowed me to investigate the domestic space in Rome, often forgotten or undervalued. The insula, with its many types and differences (residential insulae, semi-residential and workshop insulae, and so on) had a very important role in the definition of the urban space of Rome: it should have been the building unit for a rational and spatial definition of the ancient city if the Nero's project would have had enough space and time. The Nova Urbs described by the classical writers is not then a copy of the rational urbanistic result of Hippodame, but a real project born from the necessities and the restrictions of a city destroyed by the Fire.

My thesis tries to underline this unusual side of the urban development of ancient Rome, with the aim to be the starting point of a critical analysis on this subject.

For further information, e-mail:

Francesca Rossotti: [francesca\\_rossotti@hotmail.com](mailto:francesca_rossotti@hotmail.com)