



## Archaeology for commuters. The San Giovanni archaeo-station on the new metro Line C in Rome

Filippo Lambertucci\*

Sapienza Università di Roma, Dipartimento di Architettura e Progetto DIAP, via Flaminia 359, 00196 Roma, Italy  
Head – Re\_Lab, Regeneration Laboratory, via Ripetta 123, 00186 Roma, Italy

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### ABSTRACT

The construction of the San Giovanni station on the new route of Line C of the Rome metro marks a significant cultural change in Italy in the relationship between infrastructure and archaeology.

The excavations of the new line that will cross the historic centre of the city have allowed an archaeological excavation campaign unthinkable otherwise, both in terms of extension and depth, giving the city not only the inconveniences of construction sites but also valuable documents for a new perspective on its history.

For the first time in Rome one wonders how to establish a virtuous relationship between the needs of conservation and those of daily life; the illustrated project offers an example for the conservation of heritage through the tools of narration in a site where the archaeological layers have been removed but can be seen again thanks to a narrative system that envelops the passenger in a total experience, with an scientifically rigorous arrangement of museum kind but actually realized according to the speed of the commuters.

With this case study we want to demonstrate not only the possibility of combining the spaces of the stations with expositive and informative settings but also the enormous potential of the infrastructural network as an activator for the heritage of historical cities.

### 1. Introduction

It may seem strange, but in a city like Rome the relationship between underground infrastructures and archaeological heritage has begun to be seriously considered as a resource only in the last few years, thanks also to the media success of the San Giovanni metro station, opened in 2018, the first in the city to attempt a constructive relationship with archaeology and which is presented here as a case study.

With this project, in fact, for the first time a dialogue has started between disciplines that have always been considered as avowed opponents around the decision-makers' tables, where the apparently contradictory needs of conservation and functional progress of the city were often opposed.

The contrast seems even more inexplicable in a country like Italy: we boast the greatest concentration of UNESCO sites, artistic and archaeological heritage of the whole world; however, even though we developed skills of absolute excellence both in the field of heritage protection and in that of the technical design and construction of infrastructures, we seldom found the way to put them at the service one of the other.

The construction of the third subway line, the so-called “C” Line has finally offered the opportunity to develop a different approach to interaction with the historic city; the intervention was born as a project characterized by a unified image and by standard architectural solutions, but after having been realized with these characteristics in its most peripheral section, at the moment of entering the historical centre, the Heritage Superintendency required the revision of the architectural project because it considered it to be inadequate, in its standard configuration, to the context that it was supposed to cross.

It may seem a paradox, but it was a real cultural revolution: with the San Giovanni project, it has finally been proven that an effective interaction between conservation and technology can give a greater added value especially in terms of offer to the quality of the city.

Starting from this project not only an increased mutual trust between the two “adversaries” was developed, but also a strong curiosity and expectation arose on the part of the public opinion that, after having been accustomed to hearing about underground works only in terms of delays, costs and legal problems, finally can realize the immense reservoir of heritage on which they live everyday.

On the other hand, this has been one of the largest ever archaeological campaigns in the city, both in extension and depth, that has

\* Corresponding author at: Sapienza Università di Roma, Dipartimento di Architettura e Progetto DIAP, via Flaminia 359, 00196 Roma, Italy.  
E-mail address: [filippo.lambertucci@uniroma1.it](mailto:filippo.lambertucci@uniroma1.it).

been conducted for several years, and yet it has not received an adequate perception, except for some important discoveries, actually more and more exceptional, which continue to surprise both the public and the experts.

It is not necessary to remind how the underground of Rome is the most formidable deposit of layers, treasures and documents not only of the most remote antiquity, but also of more recent phases, grown on top of each other without stopping to rewrite a palimpsest that we are inheriting and on which we are called to write our page as contemporaries.

The excavations carried out for the construction of the new C line are effectively allowing archaeological findings that would have been unthinkable with normal resources, but this enormous potential has struggled to enter into the common feeling as a resource to which you can and must draw hands for an evolved and updated fruition of a city that often seems more oppressed by the weight of its own heritage rather than enriched by it.

## 2. Rome: early attempts gone wrong

Joy for the archaeologists, the stratification of the city is more often a torment for technicians and administrators, who see it as an uncontrollable obstacle to the linear programming of times and costs, and therefore the harbinger of complications, delays, cost increases, variations, which end up occupying the news with the polemics about delays or duels between builders and protection bodies.

The “cocci” (popular word for archaeological remains), as we know in Rome, are a damnation for every construction site and it is naturally unthinkable that a public work the size of a subway line should not actively deal with such a dense context.

Yet the brief and modest history of Rome's underground transport broadly demonstrates how closely the perspective has been oriented to the prevalence of “necessary evil” compared to dozens of opportunities missed forever, where the necessary evil here means the prevalence of functional and technical needs over cultural ones of the conservation.

The B line, the first one, inaugurated in 1955 despite the fact that works started as early as at the end of the '30s, is made with rudimentary techniques if compared to the complex nature of the work and the context; the excavations were in fact mainly an open trench and therefore extremely superficial, and led to the complete excavation of large areas even in very delicate archaeological contexts.

For example, the photos of the construction site of the Colosseum and Termini stations show the unrepeatability of finds and contexts that have come to light and the irremediable loss of an opportunity that has not been seized, in the absence of a sensitivity toward the heritage not yet matured (Perrone, 1955).

Under the Colosseum square the gallery is wedged between the Flavian Amphitheatre and the Arch of Constantine, running with the head of its brick vault a few tens of centimetres below the road surface, and the building of the station, built in the open air after having stripped the whole side of the hill under the current largo Agnesi, withdraws in a small and modest space behind the face of the so-called Muñoz wall, built in 1932, after the opening of via dei Fori Imperiali (Buzzetti and Pisani Sartorio, 2015).

Yet this station could offer to the thousands of tourists who pass through it the priceless surprise to suddenly emerge from the underground right in front of one of the most popular and visited monuments, along with a privileged point of view consisting of the upper terrace, both of them instead mortified by the inadequacy of the architecture and the neglect to which it has been condemned (see Fig. 1).

Even the enormous dig for the construction of the main metro B station at Termini, once again in the open air, will shut itself up, not realizing the opportunity to offer, when experiencing the underground,

the gratification of crossing the deep layers of the city (Formigari and Muscolino, 1983).

Yet the excavations, built a few dozen meters from the baths of Diocletian, had brought to light a vast complex of villas and baths with rich floorings and decorations, and had even involved a part of the ancient walls of the Servian walls (see Fig. 2) (Paris, 1996).

The result, unfortunately, was the dispersion of most of the finds, the destruction of valuable architectural spaces and a humiliating incorporation of sections of the walls into the underground corridors, according to a logic of isolation that made the archaeological relic utterly lifeless in the midst of what has become today a crowded shopping centre.

Likewise, line A, completed as a second line in 1980, failed to activate a positive relationship with the city's heritage, although it was carried out with more up-to-date technology; in fact, in this case a strategy of minimum impact with the archaeological layer was chosen, adopting a deeper level for the galleries, so that they ran under the archaeological strata hitherto known.

This is of course an approach that avoids and postpones the issue, even if it cannot completely elude it; the result, also in this case, is a series of standard stations with an anonymous design indifferent to the context crossed which coincides with the historical centre for about 25% of the line.

Although some stations open up in some of the city's most well-known and remarkable spaces, such as Piazza di Spagna, Piazza Barberini or Piazza del Popolo, their indifference remains disarming; just think that the Repubblica station is dug into the enclosure of the grandiose Baths of Diocletian and the only evidence of this location consists of a small and forgotten fragment of a semi-hidden wall in one of the passage tunnels.

The prevailing approach has been invariably one who considers archaeology and history essentially as a disturbance to the linear development of the roadmap of the construction so it is obvious in this perspective to adopt some measures that simply minimize interference.

But such an approach means to go on considering the issue as a continuous problem rather than appreciating the enormous potential offered by the Italian urban context (Lambertucci, 2013).

## 3. Italy. Lost opportunities and steering experiences

This Country presents the curious contradiction of having almost all of its cities with a rich historical heritage that is, however, evidently incompatible for shape, size and value, with a surface mobility adequate to contemporary requirements; and despite the fact that the most logical solution is offered by mass underground transport, this system is among the least developed in the country.

Larger cities such as Rome, Milan, Naples, Turin, run an average of no more than three subway lines each; this is certainly due to high construction costs, but above all to a not very effective planning, to rigid administrative procedures and to short-sighted policies although on the technical level Italian companies are able to export worldwide their know-how in the field (Lambertucci, 2016).

For a long time and somehow even today the design approach has generally seen the supremacy of the mere technical side, as if the constructive optimization were to be pursued as an independent priority over the peculiarities and values of a given environmental and urban context (Lambertucci, 2012).

In this respect any contact with the history and archaeology of the city becomes an obstacle, an incident generating delays, changes and disputes because the infrastructure project is normally designed as a rigid and possibly self-referential system; and, above all, the administrative structure that governs it is even more rigid, bound to a control system full of authorization procedures, but slow and unable to

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