

# Heritage in Transit: Contemporary Architecture and the Historical Axis of Via Pia in Rome

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the way contemporary architecture interacts with, transforms, and often takes over the past, in close reference to the development of the historical urban axis of Via Pia in Rome. Its route can now be traced in the routes of Via XX Settembre and Via del Quirinale. Following Italy's unification in 1870, this grand axial route was redesigned as a spatial narrative of the new secular state. The placement of monumental state buildings along the former Via Pia was a deliberate act meant to reinforce the symbolism of the lay state taking over the former papal city. The 20th century witnessed the construction of several representative institutional buildings, as well as the demolition of medieval and modern urban fabric to create space for new projects, in an attempt to develop a new collective memory. The paper aims to shed light on the urban, architectural, and political significance of these 20th-century interventions on the ancient Via Pia and analyse their relationship with the logic of the urban axis.

## Keywords

Rome, Via Pia/ Via XX Settembre, Urban transformations, Institutional architecture, Collective memory.

**«This has been a very difficult exercise for me and a great challenge».**

«This has been a very difficult exercise for me and a great challenge» wrote Sir Basil Spence in one of his letters to his Italian consultant, Pier Luigi Nervi, on February 4<sup>th</sup> 1963<sup>1</sup>. He was referring to the design of the new British Embassy building in Rome, acknowledging the tension of placing a Brutalist building into the historic axis of Via XX Settembre, in the proximity of Michelangelo's Porta Pia and the Aurelian Walls. Despite drawing inspiration from the architecture and proportions of the nearby monumental city gate and reinterpreting elements of late Renaissance architectural language<sup>2</sup>, its withdrawal from the street line, its exposed concrete, and its monumental pools of water mark a striking break from the surrounding urban tissue. However, this apparent rupture is also the product of a century-long process: since 1870, Via Pia – renamed Via XX Settembre and Via del Quirinale at the beginning of 1871 – had been transformed through demolitions and new insertions of buildings in different scales and styles that sequentially reshaped its role in the capital. This paper retraces those transformations and argues that the Embassy is not an isolated atypical event on the street, but a radical episode in a more extended narrative of appropriation and reinvention.

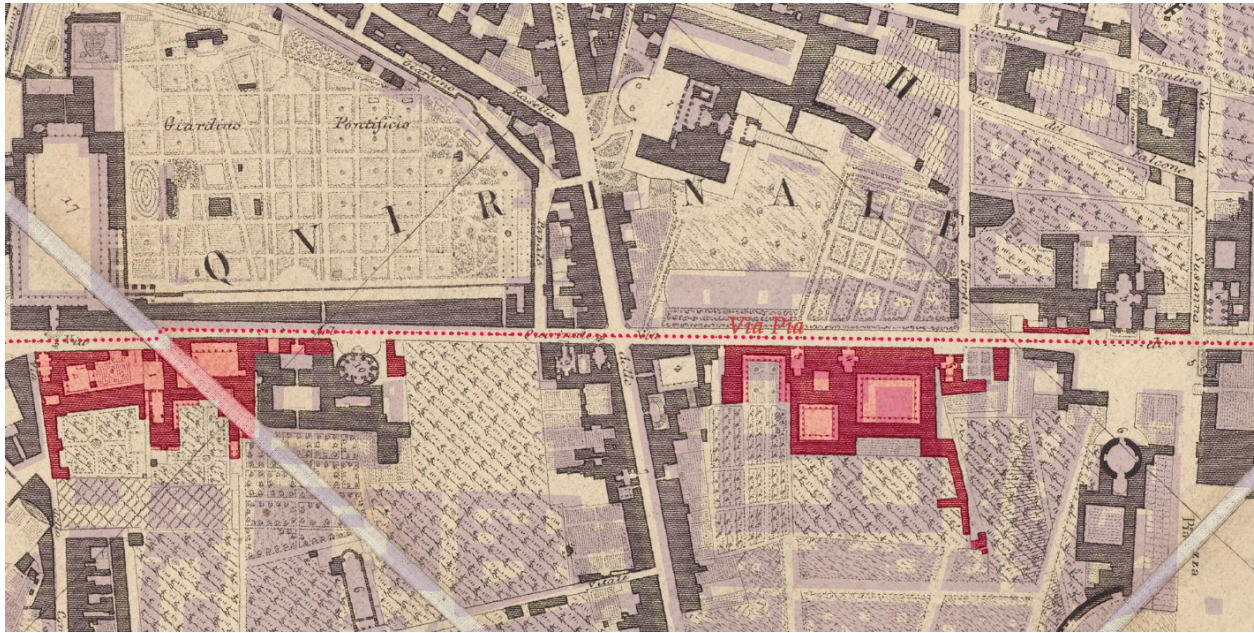


Fig. 1 Rome, fragment of Via Pia on the map of 1866, Direzione Generale del Censo, from Palazzo del Quirinale (left) to Church of S. Maria della Vittoria (right)(source: [www.davidrumsey.com](http://www.davidrumsey.com), accessed 08.09.2025), with demolished convents highlighted in red and current urban fabric overlapped in purple (elab. by N. Truşcă, 2025).

### At the dawn of 1870

A topographical map of Rome published by the Direzione Generale del Censo in 1866 reveals a significantly different landscape from today, a street with a dual character. From Piazza del Quirinale to Fontana Felice, the area was primarily marked by the presence of ecclesiastical structures, convents and their associated gardens belonging to various religious orders that lined the Via Pia, the papal street, concomitantly and after the 16<sup>th</sup>-century urban transformations initiated by popes<sup>3</sup> (Carmelites, Dominicans, Capuchins, Cistercians, Jesuits, Trinitarians). Via Pia was defined by religious institutions clustered around the new second pole of power in the city, Palazzo del Quirinale, initially used as a summer residence for the popes, and then used as a papal palace from 1585. The flourishing of the numerous religious communities was a direct effect of the Catholic Counter-Reformation and shift from 'città bella' to 'città pia' under the pontificates of Pio IV and Pio V<sup>4</sup>. The majority of these religious settlements (Fig. 1) were demolished at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to accommodate the new urban projects aimed to fulfil the latest needs and ambitions of the people and it symbolized the shift from papal to secular Rome, from the Nucleus of the Catholic Church to the Capital of the Italian state<sup>5</sup>. From Fontana Felice to Porta Pia, the street was bordered by aristocratic gardens and vineyards, belonging to noble families and monastic orders. This open, semi-rural character explains why the eastern section of Via Pia became a natural site for large-scale interventions at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### The street as a passage towards the Third Rome (1870-1900)

The name of Via Pia was changed to Via XX Settembre and Via del Quirinale one year after the Nationalist forces bombarded and breached the defensive city walls, in the proximity of Porta Pia (just 50 meters away) on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1870. This event marked the capture of Rome and cleared the way for the final unification of Italy,

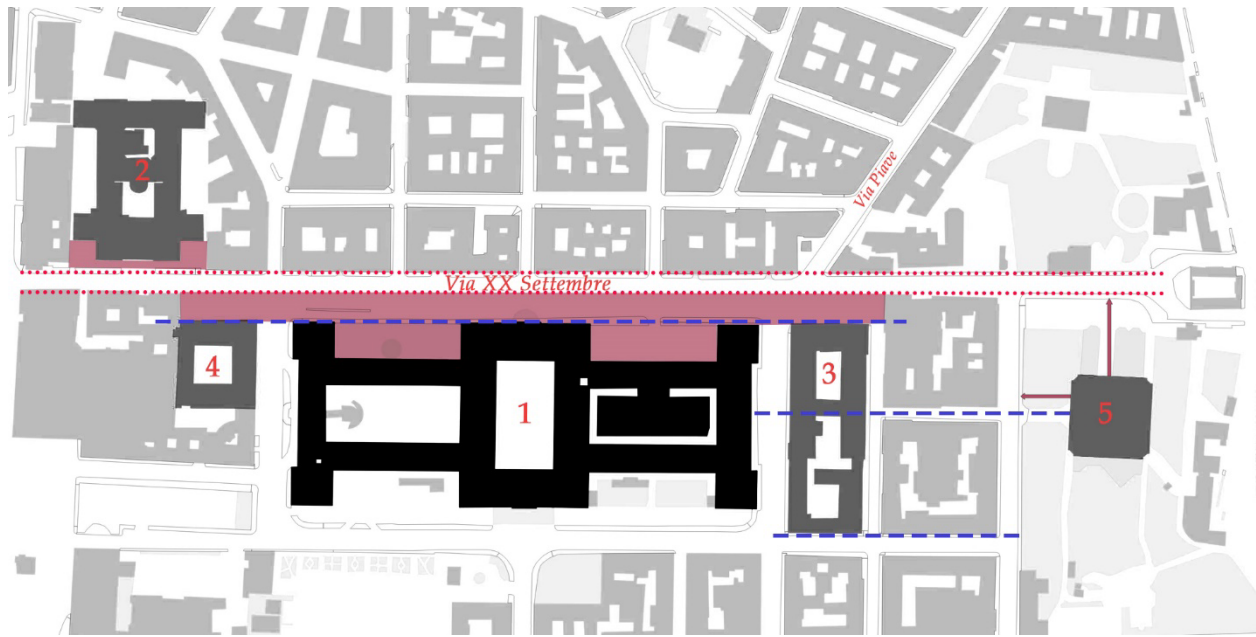


Fig. 2 Rome, Fragment of Via XX Settembre, from Largo di S. Susanna (left) to Porta Pia (right). The diagram illustrates the placement of the key 20<sup>th</sup>-century institutional buildings (1. Palazzo delle Finanze, 2. Palazzo dell'Agricoltura, 3. Palazzo della Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, 4. Palazzo del Consorzio Italiano Manifatture, 5. British Embassy) in relation to the street axis and their setbacks from the urban fabric (elab. by N. Trușcă, 2025).

transforming Rome from the capital of the Papal State into the capital of the new secular state in February 1871 and initiating the city's modernisation. From now on, the street's identity will be radically redefined as a symbol of the new Italy.

Urban transformation was unavoidable due to both practical needs and symbolic politics. The new capital urgently required new national ministries, housing for the rapidly and unprecedentedly increasing population, improved sanitary and hygienic conditions, preservation and valorisation of the architectural heritage, and a redefinition of the state's relationship with the Vatican<sup>6</sup>. One of the central locations where these needs were concentrated was Via XX Settembre because of its symbolic location near the Palazzo del Quirinale and Porta Pia, and next to the new train station, Termini.

Quintino Sella, the new minister of finance, was one of the significant figures who took part in discussions about new urban planning and envisioned a Rome that «deve essere un centro scientifico di luce, una università principalissima»<sup>7</sup>. He focused his attention and intended projects on Via XX Settembre, aiming to establish it as a key development axis of the new capital and a complex of new ministerial buildings. These ambitions, together with the development of the neighbourhood towards the train station, were already present in the first Piano Regolatore Generale from 1873. The master plan, although schematic, revealed the positions of two of the first ministries intended to be built: the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of War.

This direction was also maintained in the master plan of 1882, which detailed the intended. From Piazza del Quirinale to Via Felice, extensive demolitions of existing medieval and modern fabric was undertaken in order to open new perpendicular streets and to accommodate the latest projects, such as the public park Villa Carlo Alberto al Quirinale, the enlargement of the street (that resulted in demolishing of a part of the Novitiate of

Sant'Andrea al Quirinale and trimming part of the curved walls before the entrance of the church, fortunately saved from demolition) and, the most impactful of them, the construction of the Ministry of War. The works for the ministry consisted of the adaptation of two existing convents (although the convent structures were preserved mainly, their facades and internal organisation were substantially redesigned to serve new functions)<sup>8</sup>. The occupation of formal papal offices and monasteries satisfied the immediate need for governmental offices, and although initially seen as a temporary solution, the situation has not changed since. This attitude was also rooted in the mission of the Nationalists adopted to build a modern secular government, with no tolerance towards the Church and the clergy, suppressing Catholic orders, seizing their properties, evicting monks and nuns<sup>9</sup>. The Jesuits, who own land in the area between Diocletian Baths and Castro Pretorio, preferred to immediately sell their assets to private developers, depriving the municipality of an easy opportunity to acquire state-owned land<sup>10</sup>. The land was used for a new residential neighbourhood, Quartiere Macao, which changed the agricultural landscape that had existed since 1500. Here, the Palazzo delle Finanze, designed by the engineer Raffaele Canevari, the first new ministry building erected, through its scale, monumentality, and the refusal to align with the context (the street is purposely enlarged in front of it, an intention present since the first PRG in 1873 and a deliberate gesture of state autonomy) has become a dominant anchor of Via XX Settembre. This construction fever continued during the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although Sella's grand ambition of transforming the old Via Pia into a national axis and having a full government complex on the Quirinale Hill eventually failed because Via Nazionale took precedence, the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century urban interventions provided the framework for the 20<sup>th</sup>-century layering.

### **After 1900**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the master plan of 1909 suggests, almost the entire length of the street had been built up. Although at this point many of the municipality's projects had already taken shape, the 20<sup>th</sup> century also witnessed the construction of several representative institutional buildings – Palazzo dell'Agricoltura (1908-1914), Palazzo del Consorzio Italiano Manifatture (1939-1942), Palazzo della Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (1910), Palazzo dell'Istituto Romano Beni Stabili (1938), and the British Embassy (1968-1971), and some new residential palazzine. Together, these interventions consolidated Via XX Settembre's role as a showcase of the State's modern presence through different architectural movements of the period, such as the Neo-Renaissance, rationalism (late Fascist monumental architecture), and postwar modernist language (the brutalist embassy). From Largo Susanna to Porta Pia, the grandiose presence of the Palazzo delle Finanze polarized the edification activities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and became a benchmark for the later architectural choices. From the current layout of the area, we can notice that the new insertions are designed to establish a relationship (adhering or isolating from the aligned front) not only with the street itself, but also with the ministerial building (Fig. 2). At that moment, the state still relied on Neo-Renaissance language to express the continuity with tradition. With a façade inspired by the Palazzo Uguccioni from Florence<sup>11</sup>, the Palazzo dell'Agricoltura was constructed to accommodate the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce. Although first discussed in 1888, the Palazzo was delayed for decades and only completed in the 1910s, with multiple design revisions. The final



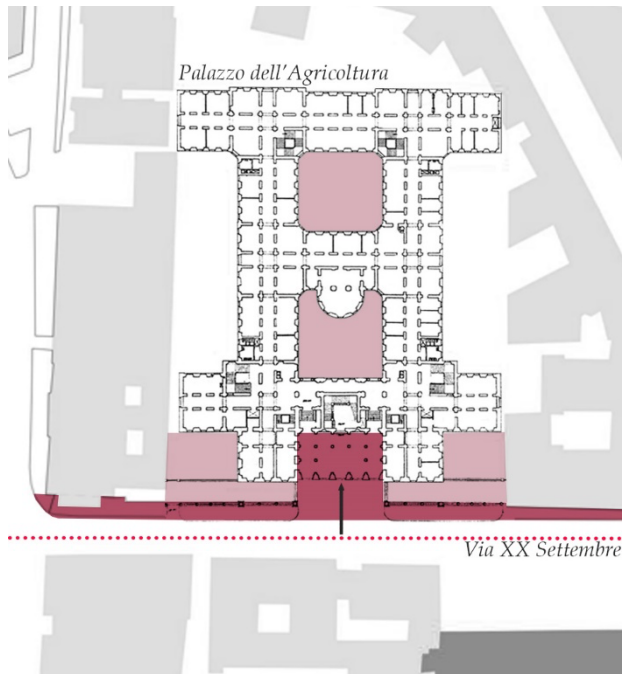


Fig. 3 Rome, Palazzo dell'Agricoltura, ground floor plan (ANGELA CIPRIANI, GIUSEPPE BARTOLOMEI (a cura di), *Il Palazzo dell'Agricoltura*, Roma, Editalia 1982, p. 31), superimposed on the urban context of Via XX Settembre (elab. by N. Trușcă, 2025).



Fig. 4 G.B. Falda, Fountain of Diana (1667) © Archivio di Stato Roma, overlapped with the current situation © Google Street View (elab. by N. Trușcă, 2025).

version of the project is attributed to the engineers Odoardo Cavagnari and Giuseppe Canonica, with contributions from architect Giuseppe Castellucci. It replicates the formal detachment of the Financial Ministry through a slight setback from the street (a unique attitude on that side of the street, on the interval between Largo di S. Susanna and Porta Pia), a withdrawal of the lateral wings (creating two small gardens in front of them) and through the monumental forecourt (the space in front of the building, together with the elaborated portico, forms a public space with similar proportions to the other 2 square interior courtyards, showing that it was an intended effect) (Fig. 3). This decision reinforces the wanted dominance over the historical site marked by the presence of Fontana Felice and the Convent of S. Maria della Vittoria. It also created a more favourable perception from the level of the narrow street.

At the same time as Palazzo dell'Agricoltura, Palazzo della Cassa Depositi e Prestiti was being built and inaugurated in 1910. By aligning with Palazzo delle Finanze both in plan and façade stylistic treatment and showcasing the main entrance towards it, this palace consolidates the status of the ministry as a stylistic reference point. The decision to align the building with the ministry instead of the street might also have come from a functional decision to allow a good transition towards Via Salaria. The plan of the building, although limited by the narrow land, is organised around three consecutive similar interior courtyards, like Palazzo delle Finanze, continuing the historicist language.

On the other side of the Palazzo delle Finanze, on the site where the 17th-century Palazzo dell'Annona used to be, there is a building showcasing a totally different style. Built between 1938 and 1941, subscribing to the rationalism movement, Palazzo del Consorzio Italiano Manifatture (today Banca d'Italia), though designed in a

modernist key, maintains a strong communication with the same Palazzo delle Finanze. Firstly, like Palazzo della Casa Depositi e Prestiti, it aligns with the ministry and not with the 16th-century Fontana Felice or the palace next to it (built at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century). Then, the way the façade is articulated with its rhythm and registers obtained through the contrast between the construction materials of the façade (the glass and the travertine) is a direct reflection of the central façade of the ministry. Therefore, more than the street itself, the new state building gravitates towards the Ministry of Finance.

In an attempt to negotiate the historical context, at the other end of the street, in the crossroads of the Quattro Fontane, the Palazzo dell'Istituto Romano Beni Stabili of 1938 had to fit a more restrictive context, marked by the presence of Renaissance and Baroque architectural masterpieces. However, even if the result aligns perfectly with the crossroads, the integration of modern lines with selected valuable pre-existing elements (the Fontana di Diana, the garden portal by Pietro da Cortona, and the devotional aedicule of Madonna della Pietà) shows tension between state modernism and urban heritage. The tension is further intensified by the decision to demolish existing buildings belonging to Palazzo Barberini for the construction of this new edifice (Fig. 4).

## Conclusion

From the papal Via Pia to today's Via XX Settembre and Via del Quirinale, this urban axis illustrates the complex way in which modern Rome redefined its heritage. The triumph of the secular state over the papacy took different shapes – the demolition of numerous convents, the seizure of the private gardens and vineyards, and the insertion of monumental state architecture. Twentieth-century interventions, from rationalist palaces to the British Embassy, reinforced this process by layering new identities onto the street while negotiating, slightly or violently, with its historical context. The street has evolved into a mosaic of diverse architectural styles where heritage and modernity are inseparable. The challenge this evolution presents today is not only to preserve this rich stratification but also to engage with it critically as part of Rome's architectural memory.

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Sir Basil Spence to Pier Luigi Nervi (1963), MAXXI – Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Archivio Pier Luigi Nervi, Fondo 31, p.54/4 IX.

<sup>2</sup> GIUSEPPE GRIECO, *Il rapporto fra l'architettura moderna e contemporanea nella trasformazione della preesistenza nell'architettura di Roma dal 1945 ai giorni nostri. I quartieri Esquilino, Castro Pretorio, Sallustiano e Ludovisi. Lettura a scala urbana e architettonica*. PhD diss., Roma, Sapienza Università di Roma 2013, pp. 101, 102.

<sup>3</sup> The most influential popes of the 16th century regarding the transformation and evolution of the street and of the Quirinale area are Pope Pius IV (1559-1565) and Pope Sixtus V (1585-1590). For more details, see FEDERICO BELLINI, *Michelangelo, la strada e la Porta Pia*, «STUDI ROMANI», LIX, 2011, pp. 74-110 and TOD A. MARDER, *Sixtus V and the Quirinal*, «Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians», XXXVII, 1978, pp. 283-294.

<sup>4</sup> SIMONA BENEDETTI, *L'attività edilizia dei nuovi ordini religiosi nella Roma del Cinquecento*, in Giorgio Simoncini (a cura di), *Roma: le trasformazioni urbane nel Cinquecento II: dalla città al territorio*, Florence, Leo S. Olschki Editore 2008, pp. 39, 42.

<sup>5</sup> FERRUCCIO LOMBARDI, *Roma. Le chiese scomparse. La memoria storica della città*, Roma, Fratelli Polombi Editori, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> FRANK J. COSTA, *Urban Planning in Rome from 1870 to the First World War*, «GeoJournal», XXIV, 3, 1991, pp. 269-276.

<sup>7</sup> QUINTINO SELLA, *Discorso sul progetto di istituzione di laboratori di scienza all'Università di Roma*, citato in GIANNI ACCASTO, VANNA FRATICELLI, RENATO NICOLINI, *L'architettura di Roma Capitale: 1870-1970*, Roma, Edizioni Golem 1971, p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> SILVIA CRIALESI, *I ministeri nei complessi conventuali di Roma capitale: atteggiamenti dottrinari, normativa e realizzazioni a confronto*, PhD diss., Rome, Sapienza Università di Roma 2023, pp. 98-112.

<sup>9</sup> TAYLOR RABUN, RINNE KATHERINE WENTWORTH, SPIRO KOSTOF, *Rome: An Urban History from Antiquity to the Present*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2016, p. 316.

<sup>10</sup> ITALO INSOLERA, PAOLO BERDINI, *Roma moderna. Due secoli di storia urbanistica*, Torino, Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi 2024.

<sup>11</sup> ANGELA CIPRIANI, GIUSEPPE BARTOLOMEI (a cura di), *Il Palazzo dell'Agricoltura*, Roma, Editalia 1982, p. 31.