

# THE SETTLEMENT PATTERN OF MODERN ROME

EDWARD KARABENICK

*California State College, Long Beach*

Following the disintegration of the Roman Empire the population of the city of Rome declined steadily from over 1,000,000 to a low of 17,000 during the Middle Ages. Subsequent to this period the growing influence of the papacy provided the basis for modest population growth, but it was Rome's selection as the capital of the newly-united Italy in 1871 that made possible its re-emergence as a great city. Since that date its population has grown rapidly, increasing from 200,000 to over 2,000,000 (Table 1). However the settlement pattern coincident with this growth has been unusual.

TABLE 1: Population Growth of Rome

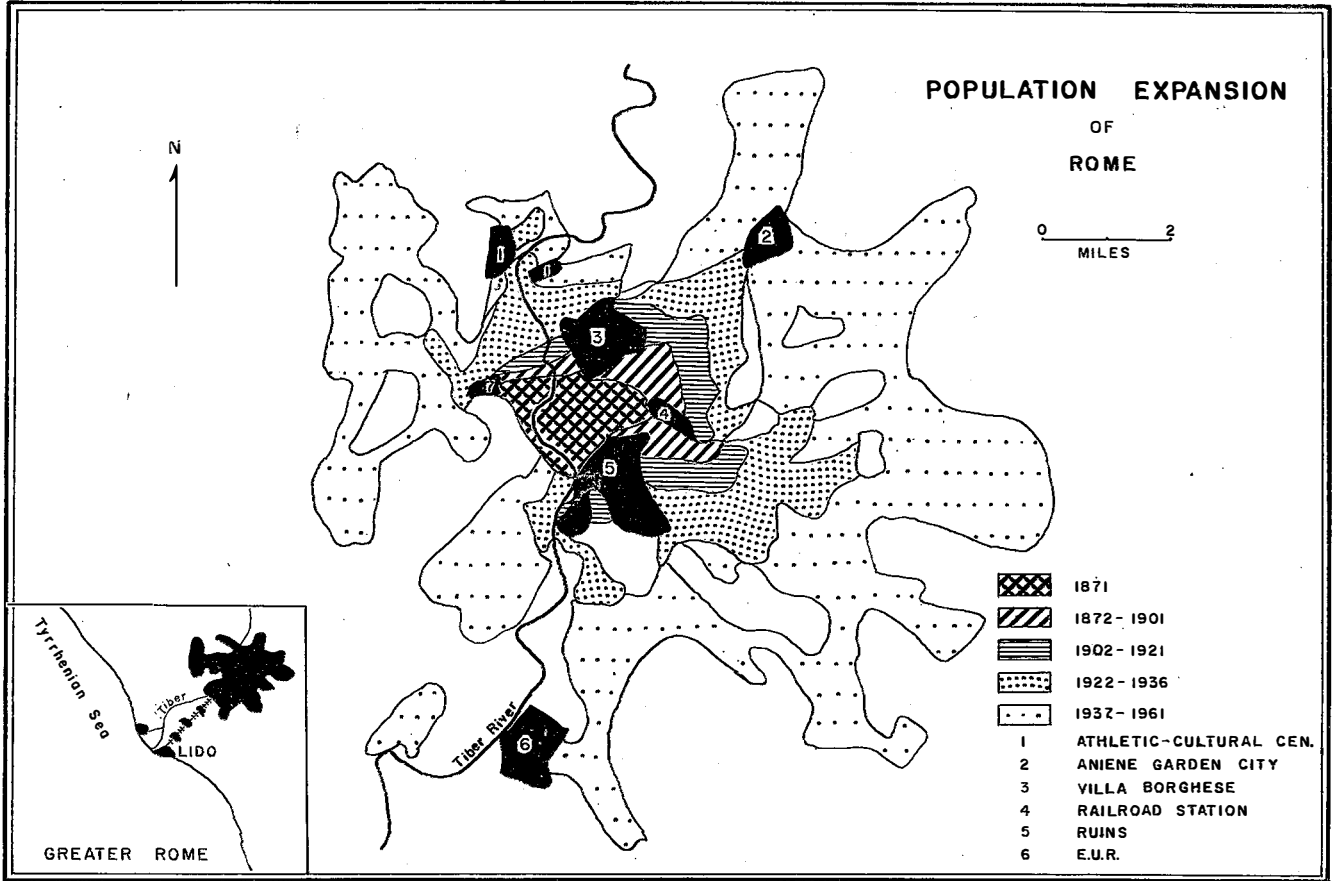
Year	Population
1871 . . . . .	213,633
1881 . . . . .	275,637
1891 . . . . .	386,626
1901 . . . . .	424,943
1911 . . . . .	546,002
1921 . . . . .	664,373
1931 . . . . .	942,206
1941 . . . . .	1,403,307
1951 . . . . .	1,653,163
1961 . . . . .	2,170,386

Source: Commune of Rome, *Annuario Statistico della Citta di Roma 1952-54*, and Commune of Rome, *Bolettino Statistico 1962*.

The present-day distribution of Rome's population strongly suggests that expansion from the urban core has occurred in a normal radial pattern (Figure 1): Actually, however, each of the cardinal directions of expansion was added in a separate period. In 1871 most of the population was clustered on the left bank of the Tiber. For the next 30 years virtually all settlement occurred in a generally eastward direction. Only by the turn of the century, when Romans began to move northward, did large-scale settlement begin to unfold in other directions. It was not until the end of World War II that people began to move in large numbers to the west and south of the urban core. The explanation for this unusual growth pattern lies in a complex of physical and cultural factors.

## EASTWARD SETTLEMENT

The early heavy eastward settlement can best be explained by the difficulties of growth in other directions. Since expansion was blocked by the rugged Sabatine Hills to the west, the vast Villa Borghese estate to the north, and by broad expanses of marshes and ruins to the south, the gently-rolling lands east of the urban core were especially inviting to new settlement. Still another important stimulus for an early eastward growth was the construction of Rome's major railroad station a mile east of the urban core. Completed in 1871, the station served as a principal focal point for several newly-constructed thoroughfares, the most important being the via Nazionale. As government expenditures increased with Rome's new



role as the national capital, the rate of in-migration to the city rapidly increased, and these new boulevards became the guidelines for the heavy eastward settlement. This dynamic early population burst established an eastward expansion momentum which has persisted to the present day, despite the fact that obstacles to expansion in other directions have been gradually overcome.

#### NORTHWARD SETTLEMENT

The first of these barriers to give way to the overwhelming pressures of Rome's growing population was the Villa Borghese. This large estate had effectively diverted expansion for 30 years, but by the turn of the twentieth century it began to succumb to the pressures of the city's growth. The initial stage of northern settlement had begun to take form by 1900 but it did not reach maturity for another 30 years. Not until the advent of the Mussolini era was the villa completely surrounded by residences and left behind in the wake of urban expansion.

The credit for radically altering the traditional eastward settlement pattern of Rome must be given to Mussolini. While it is often an oversimplification to associate major changes with one person, in the case of Mussolini his profound influence in Rome's settlement pattern is unmistakable.

Although a northward population drift would certainly have occurred with or without Mussolini, his development of areas north of the urban core accelerated settlement and gave it a more definite course. When Mussolini assumed control of the Italian government in 1921 population growth had advanced only slightly northward, both up the Tiber valley to the west of the Villa Borghese and along the eastern perimeter of the estate itself. The dictator's early announcement of plans for the construction of a large new athletic and cultural center two miles north of the urban center and a large garden city, Monte Sacro, three miles northeast of it provided the necessary impetus for a heavier northward expansion. The prosperity of the Mussolini era also saw the rise of a new wealthy class, which began to move into the Parioli Hills just north of the Villa Borghese. By 1930 a full-fledged northward expansion had been established and the Rome settlement pattern had now assumed a second cardinal direction. Settlement northward, however, was never to equal the vigor and constancy of the eastward expansion. Strangely enough, it was the subsequent growth southward to the sea which was to gain a momentum equalling, and perhaps surpassing, that to the east. This greatly-retarded development most strongly reflected the will of one man. In carrying out his ambitious program in this direction Mussolini was faced with staggering emotional as well as physical barriers.

#### SOUTHWARD SETTLEMENT

The two physical factors primarily responsible for the retarded growth were the previously-mentioned ruins districts and marshes south of the urban core. These remnants of a previous civilization provided more of a psychological than a physical impediment to Rome's growth. People had come to accept the ruins as the southern limit of settlement; to go beyond the ruins was to move beyond the pale. The tales of misery and malaria associated with the marshlands were well known to the Roman, and the

feelings of disgust and fear which he had developed were perhaps the most effective barrier of all to southward settlement. Even as late as World War I only one important residential district had arisen south of the urban core in the Tiber valley. Mussolini's great vision of Rome was one of a vast metropolis stretching all the way to the mouth of the Tiber. Fully aware of the monumental projects that lay before him, he undertook the program with pronounced vigor. The drainage of the marshlands was basic to the success of the entire program, and by 1928 this enormous project was completed, freeing the delta area and much of the Tiber valley from over a thousand years of decay. Shortly afterwards a rail line, and paralleling express highway were completed from central Rome to Lido di Ostia,<sup>1</sup> near the mouth of the Tiber. Having laid the groundwork, Mussolini could now look forward to his most ambitious plan: the construction of an entirely new urban core south of the existing city.

Badly disturbed by the growing difficulty of old Rome to cope with the onslaught of the automobile age, Mussolini conceived the idea of removing all central activity from the existing urban core to a new one four miles south. The new district was to serve first as an exposition area for the 1942 World's Fair, after which major governmental agencies were to occupy the monumental structures. Commerce was to follow later. Upper-income residential districts were then to surround the newly-created zones. The new area, which came to be called simply the E.U.R. (Universal Exposition of Rome), was to be more effectively connected with Rome by an additional express highway and the city's first subway.

Construction was initiated in the 1930's, but the Second World War began before the buildings and the subway were completed. The aftermath of the war brought many changes regarding the magnitude and soundness of the project. Rather than abandon its enormous investment, however, the city decided to complete the E.U.R. with certain modifications. The basic Mussolini concept, freeing central Rome of its congestion, was maintained, but the proposed size of the E.U.R. was curtailed. Several governmental agencies are already housed in the magnificent buildings, and numerous upper-income residential units have been constructed since 1945. At present approximately 10,000<sup>2</sup> people live in the area. The subway, plagued with continual interruptions because of archeological discoveries, was finally completed in 1955 after almost 20 years.

The impact of the rapidly rising E.U.R. district has been strongly felt. The disdain once held for the region south of the ruins has virtually disappeared, and a nearly complete reversal of opinion has followed. Firms and individuals which would have previously shunned the area are now drifting southward towards the E.U.R., partially fulfilling Mussolini's dreams.

Closely correlated with the growth of the Universal Exposition grounds is the emergence of Lido di Roma in the Tiber delta. First connected to Rome in the 1920's by the new railroad, the town became a popular summer resort. Extremely heavy population pressures in the post-

<sup>1</sup> Now called Lido di Roma.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Mario Figa-Talamanca, Director, Office of Statistics of the Comune of Rome, April 1963.

World War II years changed the destiny of the Lido. As a post-war emergency measure, Lido di Roma, politically a part of Rome, was used to house some of the central city's population. The Lido's population continued to increase, and at present 25,000 people live there. Under the guidance of a master plan the eventual population will reach 135,000.<sup>3</sup> Several smaller settlements have also begun to appear along the Rome-Lido railroad between the E.U.R. and the Lido di Roma. Settlement in the

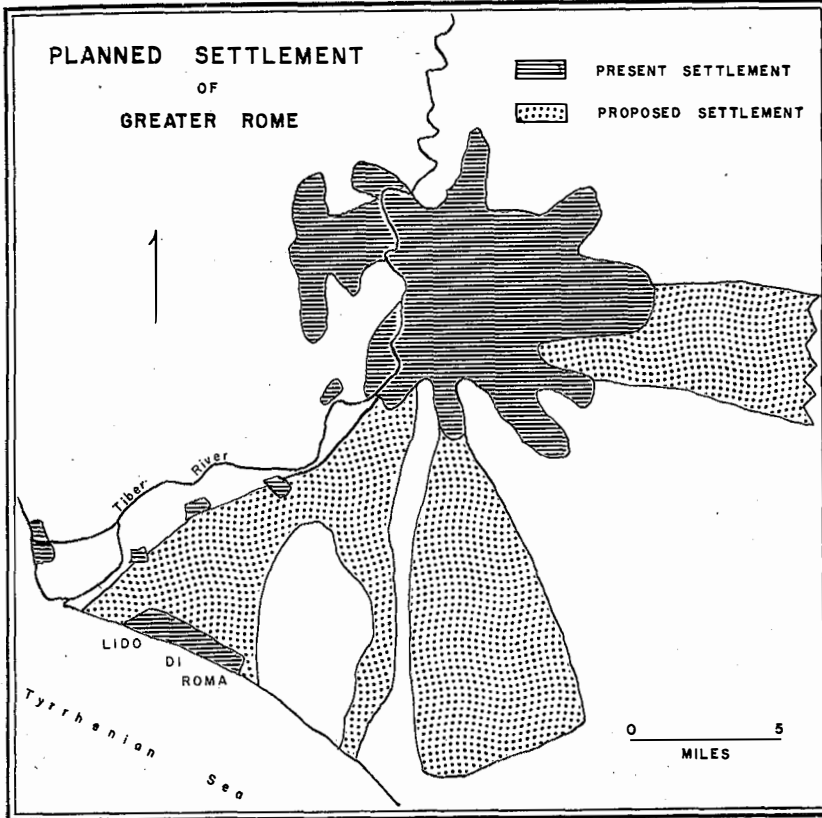


Figure 2

southern portion of metropolitan Rome has, thus, manifested itself in a series of unconnected nuclei along the railroad and highway. In time these nuclei should coalesce with the growing central city.

#### WESTWARD SETTLEMENT

As with expansion southward, the westward growth of Rome has been largely a post-war phenomenon. The rugged terrain west of the Tiber provides the explanation for this retarded development. Beginning almost at the river's banks, the strongly dissected Sabatine Hills create a formi-

<sup>3</sup> Robson, W.A., ed., *Great Cities of the World* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954), p. 541.

dable barrier to urban expansion. Following World War II the previously prohibitive construction costs were largely offset by post-war conditions in Rome. The extremely critical housing shortage set into motion an almost feverish building program. With places as distant as Lido di Roma participating in the program, the proximity of the hilly western area took on new value and significance. Building contractors renewed their interest in the region as higher construction costs associated with this terrain were being offset by the rising land values resulting from the proximity to central Rome. With the weakening of the western hill barrier, Rome's settlement pattern had acquired its fourth dimension. Like expansion to the north, westward growth will probably always lag somewhat, but it will continue as long as the equilibrium can be maintained between the proximity to the urban core and the higher construction costs on this rugged terrain.

#### THE MASTER PLAN OF ROME

Over the decades the role of planning has assumed continually greater proportions in Rome's settlement pattern. This role promises to increase markedly in the coming years because of the nature of the city's new master plan.<sup>4</sup> While previous master plans have been primarily traffic correctional schemes, the new plan encompasses many new ramifications. The major objectives of the present plan are: to broaden Rome's economic base by promoting several new industrial zones, to make central Rome largely an historical zone by diverting through traffic and removing most economic activity, and to create three vast new residential zones (Figure 2).<sup>5</sup>

These three zones will unfold to the east and south into terrain that offers little resistance to urban growth. Each of the zones will cover approximately 60 square miles and will house primarily low and lower middle income families. In all probability, the principal future settlement of Rome will occur in these planned districts. The northern and western flanks of the city, the traditional upper middle and upper income districts of Rome, have been left to grow "naturally" in the master plan. The relatively higher building costs in these areas, as well as the small number of people in Rome's middle and upper classes, would seem to indicate a continued slow rate of settlement in these directions.

#### SUMMARY

Modern Rome's settlement pattern has been strongly influenced by both physical and cultural factors. The prejudices so long associated with certain areas of the city have been gradually subdued and are no longer a serious factor in discouraging settlement in any direction; the relief of the Roman Campagna has become the principal influence in Rome's settlement pattern. The relatively level lands east and south of the city continue to provide the least costly avenues of expansion to the growing metropolis, and primarily for this reason the new master plan has chosen these directions for future settlement. Because of these factors it would seem that the pattern of Rome's future settlement is quite clear. The city should continue to expand in all directions, with the principal growth occurring towards the east and south.

<sup>4</sup> The present master plan of Rome was made public in 1962.

<sup>5</sup> *Il Popolo* (Rome), November 18, 1962, p. 8.