

## CHAPTER 5

*Rebibbia: a narrow stretch of paradise between the Tiburtina and Nomentana. A land of mammoths, acetate coveralls, imprisoned bodies, and big hearts.*

(Zerocalcare, 2011)

# Prisons, Cities, and Urban Planning. The Rebibbia Prison in Rome

*Elio Trusiani and Rosalba D'Onofrio*

This text addresses the city/prison relationship between Rebibbia Prison and Rome, with specific emphasis on urban aspects and general urban-planning tools. The discussion is limited to the present as it may even be more interesting than planning in Rome in the first decade of this century. The paper describes the content and objectives of the urban-planning tools, highlighting the prison/city relationship and factors of inclusion and exclusion present in the tools themselves. Some *in* and *out* relationships with the cultural and political world are also highlighted.

## **A brief introduction**

There are currently two prisons in the city of Rome: Regina Coeli and Rebibbia. The historical prison is Regina Coeli. This is located in the Trastevere neighbourhood within a former convent that was built in 1654 and adapted for use as a prison between 1881 and 1902. Over time, the original prison centre was expanded with an adjacent structure for the women's prison known as "Le Mantellate", and a detached structure was built in Via Tasso during the Fascist

period to house political prisoners. The Rebibbia Prison, which was built more recently, is instead located in a peripheral area of the city between Via Tiburtina and Via Nometana. Construction began at the end of the 1930s and was completed in its current state in the 1960-1970s.

## The prison

Rome's Rebibbia Prison is one of the four penitentiary institutes constituting the so-called Rebibbia Prison and Correctional Facility. Known as the Penal House until 1975, the prison houses different types of inmates, such as common prisoners incarcerated to serve a definitive sentence and mentally disabled inmates.

The institute is substantially rectangular and constructed in a panoptic star system where all detention wings can be observed from the centre. Each wing is divided into two sections. Of the total of six sections, four are designated for medium-security housing of common inmates and one houses inmates admitted to the external work program. The design of the current complex dates to 1960. Work was begun in 1965 and the institute was opened in 1971. The institute is composed of 351 single rooms and 319 shared rooms on a surface area of 27 ha and a building volume of 354,000 m<sup>3</sup>. The common spaces and structures include 2 sportsfields, 2 gyms, 12 classrooms, 2 libraries, 3 prayer rooms, 1 laboratory, and 3 shops. Activities carried out within the prison are dedicated to instruction (elementary and middle school, language courses, high school, and university centres), professional training, work, cultural activities (theatres, philosophical practices, cinema therapy, archaeobotany, religious courses, etc.), and sports (football, tennis, volleyball, weightlifting, etc.). The theatre activities are of particular interest. Since 2000, the "La Ribalta" Enrico Maria Salerno Study Centre hosts initiatives favouring the spread of theatre at the prison, creating training laboratories and specialization courses in theatre professions, with numerous shows that have been attended by more than 32,000 external spectators (60% are high school and university students). The laboratory ends each year with a show developed within the institute for outside audiences, including the actors' families. For the last four years, the show has also been presented outside the prison in some of the most important theatres in Rome (the Quirino and Argentina Theatres). Actors in the High-Security Theatre Laboratory starred in the film

“Caeser Must Die”, by the Taviani brothers, which was filmed entirely within the prison and which won the Golden Bear Award at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2012.

The institute was named after Cardinal Scipione Rebiba, the owner of vast lands, which today make up the Ponte Mammolo quarter where the prison is located; the neighbourhood owes its name to Ponte Mammolo, the bridge over the Aniene River. The origins of the name (in use since 1388) are the source of much speculation. On the one hand, some claim that it refers to the ancient Roman name Pons Mammeus or Pons Mammi, attributed to Giulia Mamea, the mother of Alessandro Severo, who supported its restoration. On the other hand, some claim the name derives from a contraction of *marmoreus*, since the old bridge was built in travertine.

The pre-existing archaeological history is therefore surrounded by various historical events<sup>1</sup>. Today it not only constitutes one of the neighbourhood’s memories, but also connects the present with ancient history in a peripheral quarter of Rome with a strong urban, social, political, and architectural connotation. In fact, this is a quarter that bridges the periphery of the consolidated city and the limits of the municipal territory. Laid out along one of the historical directions of city expansion after the Second World War, Via Tiburtina, the quarter collects and represents—even with the immediate surroundings of the San Basilio neighbourhood—multiple local identities.

## The Quarter

As mentioned above, the Rebibbia Prison is located in the Ponte Mammolo neighbourhood, also known as the Rebibbia neighbourhood due to the

---

1 Tradition says that Hannibal camped here during his invasion of Rome. As well, this is where the encounter between Henry IV and Pope Paschal II took place, in full “battle for the investiture” between the Papacy and Empire. Moreover, twenty years later, it saw the historical passage of Pope Innocent III on his return from France. Well fortified, the ancient Ponte Mammolo enjoyed a law enacted in 1363, the *numeratiopercudum*, which established that all rams and goats crossing the bridge should be counted and that no cart pulled by horses, oxen, or buffalo could cross the bridges of Rome except Ponte *Mammolosine taglione*, that is, without being towed; if unnumbered animals were found, they were confiscated by the Apostolic Camera. To block Garibaldi’s defence of the Roman Republic, Ponte Mammolo was destroyed by the French in 1849. The high cost of restoration pushed Pope Pius IX and the Provincial Congregation to build another. A twin bridge was built in the 1990s since the other was deemed unsafe. The remains of the ancient Ponte Mammolo can be seen from ViadegliAlberini where it meets Via Tiburtina.

presence of the tower with the same name. The neighbourhood dates from the end of the 1920s and over time, development has grown up around the penitentiary building, whose construction began in 1938. From the beginning, the original prison centre looked like an area that had arisen spontaneously, where numerous industrial factories were gradually created. Its proximity to the centre of the city and the Roma Tiburtina railroad stop, as well as the low cost of buildable land, favoured the development of the zone itself. The first growth of the neighbourhood affected the area surrounding Via Tiburtina, where the Church of the Sacro Cuore was built in 1936.

Following Via Bartolo Longo, which accesses the Rebibbia Prison, the Aguzzano Regional Park can be accessed by continuing on Via Paternò di Sessa. This park is a green “border” lung in the neighbourhood and an element connecting the surrounding urban areas that gravitate towards Via Nomentana. The ancient Rebibbia Tower, the ecological island with its artificial lake, and the cultural centre complete the pre-existing framework and the neighbourhood facilities, together with the last station on the northern leg of Rome’s B Metro Line—Rebibbia—situated on Via Tiburtina.

As mentioned above, the quarter is composed of different urban fabrics, both planned and spontaneous, that grew up around the focal point of the Rebibbia Prison. The urban fabric and abusive building—small in dimension and scale—can be seen, along with inexpensive state buildings with their typical building/urban characteristics, the planned city built by private investors and cooperatives in the typical Roman style, and the industrial, artisan, and commercial city which is partially disused, located in some large buildings on Via Tiburtina. (fig. 5.1)

The juxtaposition of different forms and settlements is immediately apparent from a quick, birds-eye view. Chronologically, they date to the end of the Second World War, except for the original unauthorized centre. However, they create not a homogeneous, complete, compact fabric but rather an area characterized by fragmentation in which architectural, completed, self-referential episodes are more evident than an overall urban design, i.e., the result of precise strategies and a shared vision. This is an urban area *in* and *of* transformation within which the Rebibbia Prison emerges from the context due to its size, type, and, obviously, limits of its own areas, while the borders between the individual parts of the quarter are undefined and unstable.



**Figure 5.1** The Rebibbia's surrounding area industrial buildings abandoned. Reproduced with permission; no reuse without rightsholder permission.

Perhaps unfortunately, the prison constitutes an “unwanted” centrality in the current structure of the quarter for both its form and its size. Its function certainly relates not to the quarter, but to the urban metropolis, even though its presence characterizes and connotes the entire quarter, both dividing it physically/spatially and uniting it through a series of tertiary activities that go beyond its walls to create a direct connection between *inside* and *outside*. The prison represents one of the identities of the neighbourhood, which has now become historical in the urban memory of the city, and not only locally. It is a well-recognized physical identity that contains many other diverse identities, each one carrying personal histories—in many cases unique—that become part of the life of the quarter, even if they apparently remain segregated within the prison walls.

## The urban-planning tool, social regulatory plan, and the Rome prison plan

In 2003 and 2008, respectively, the City of Rome adopted and approved the new Regulatory Plan, thereby concluding a course of planning that began with

the *Piano delle Certezze*<sup>2</sup> (Certainty Plan), which was adopted in 1997. By adopting the plan, Rome assumed, at least in intent, a new perspective on building development within a protected, enhanced, historical/environmental system based concretely on sustainability and aimed at the functional and spatial reorganization of its settlement structures.

The main founding elements of the new tool are: Overcoming the concept of “historical centre” and assuming the concept of “historical city”<sup>3</sup>; identifying five areas of strategic planning<sup>4</sup> as the backbone of the new plan; protecting the territory as extended to about 87,000 ha; considering the *Roman country* as a fundamental part of a complex environmental system; interpreting the city no longer as homogeneous zones but as fabrics; and finally, basing the new organizational model on diffuse centralities. Without addressing the merit of the individual aspects, the model of diffuse centralities is worth a brief explanation. The centralities are arranged on two levels: metropolitan and local. The metropolitan centres (about twenty) are located at communication nodes in order to build a network of physical and non-material relationships that can respond to the needs of the contemporary metropolis. They are designed to gather the functions and services offered by the city, both nationally and internationally, in both the provincial and regional territory. In contrast, the local centralities (about fifty) are destined for the inhabitants of more limited, well-defined urban surroundings. The division into historical city, consolidated city, restoration city, transformation city, and structural projects constitutes the content of the so-called “systems and rules” plans that synthesize the future scenario of the city and the means of initiating the established works.

Consolidated city, restoration city, diffuse centralities: these are, in effect, the keywords deduced from the plan to clarify provisions for the Ponte Mammolo quarter and the areas surrounding the Rebibbia Prison. One particular aspect

---

2 The *Piano delle Certezze* considered and defined various structural characteristics of the territory such as the consolidated city, including the historical city and external areas to be conserved, while for the transformation city, it referred each decision to the new tool.

3 This allowed the old concept of “historical centre”, related to the oldest part of the urban centre, to be overcome in favour of the “historical city”, which comprises a wider view spread over the territory (from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance to the 1800s).

4 The areas of strategic planning synthesize the result of research into a planning tool that can recall a coherent framework of urban realities pertaining to analytical and regulatory categories. The categories are different but connected by structural relational nodes in reference to the “double system” of values and functions.

is the provision of an urban centrality at Ponte Mammolo to be planned with the function of public direction.

With specific regard to the prison, the plan is limited to classifying it as an “urban-level public service” without addressing the relationship with the surrounding urban environment, which is where the expected interventions within the fabrics of the consolidated and restoration cities are focused. Particular emphasis is placed on interventions to renovate the existing settlements. The Aguzzano Park becomes a unique part of the system of protected areas of the Aniene River. It acts like glue between the individual built areas and also responds to inhabitants’ quantitative and qualitative need for green areas. In its role as urban glue, it defines the edges of the prison outside its walls. Public residential building present in the limiting areas of Rebibbia (both historical and not, such as the Fascist-era village of San Basilio and the Tiburtino III settlement) becomes, in some cases, the historical 1800s presence of the so-called “historical city” in the new plan, and provides the cultural memory of the 1800s in the complex programs that should activate the interventions of urban renewal. (fig. 5.2, fig. 5.3)



**Figure 5.2** The Rebibbia’s surrounding area: historical residential buildings and areas undergoing transformation. Reproduced with permission; no reuse without rightsholder permission.



**Figure 5.3** The Rebibbia's surrounding area: recent residential buildings. Reproduced with permission; no reuse without rightsholder permission.

If the general regulatory plan is inevitably restricted to defining the prison structure as a public service on the “urban” level, excluding at least apparently a direct dialogue between the prison and the surrounding urban space, the social regulatory plan (SRP) re-establishes this relationship. The SRP represents the uniting design of the urban welfare system, a framework/device for the social policies of the city. It proposes to simultaneously guarantee the global nature of the citizen dimension (the integrated system of services and social interventions in the city of Rome) and the specifics of local needs (the zoning plans of the individual municipalities) in its decentralized, interdependent organizations. In this way, both the metropolitan identity of citizen social policies and the planning and management autonomy of the municipalities are recognized.

In reference to the SRP and the municipality containing the Rebibbia Prison in particular, some actions and strategic choices have been identified to establish a connection between neighbourhood and prison. The link is recognized as a “unique peculiarity with respect to other Roman municipalities...whose



‘guests’, always and aside from their official residence, are considered to all effects and purposes as citizens of the 5<sup>th</sup> Municipality. An element that makes the presence in the municipal territory of the Rebibbia Prison even more particular is the presence ... of the Rebibbia Women’s Prison, where there is also a nursery section that houses mothers with children under the age of three. For more than a decade, the children have joined and regularly attended the city nursery schools around the penitentiary institute, despite their official residence or the time of year in which the mothers are incarcerated” (5<sup>th</sup> Municipality SRP).

With regard to the historical relationship between the municipal services and the Rebibbia correctional facilities, some strong and weak points underlined in the SRP should be highlighted. Strong points include “the existence of a network of cooperatives between inmates that is well integrated with the services and the territory; the custom of cultural activities carried out within the prison by the territorial organizations”. Weak points include “the seriousness of the women’s condition in prison, especially for foreigners and itinerants; the fragility and short length of support processes upon release; the return of prejudice in wide areas of the territory, which is also reinforced by the debate on pardons and the identification between inmates and foreigners; and the still insufficient availability of resources, even from credit systems, aimed at supporting the creation of business between male and female inmates”. (SRP)

The development process for the above-mentioned actions, and therefore with regard to inclusion, is supported on various levels by several national and regional laws that establish the “possibility of using 10% of the contracts of a public entity for the direct commitment of supply and service contracts to social cooperatives or non-profit organizations. In establishing this opportunity, the legislature is clearly charged with guaranteeing a protected insertion in the public market that allows non-profit structures and those with specific social scopes to be directly included in the production system, in order to guarantee work placement and training for ‘weak’ subjects. The 5<sup>th</sup> Municipality has often made use of these opportunities, also contributing directly to the birth of social cooperatives within the prison system (the largest penitentiary complex in Europe is located in Italy) and supporting them through the assignment of sites and small contracts. In return, they have received not only good results with the work reinsertion plan, but also the ‘free’ supply of small services and the insertion of people in training internships or socially useful

activities. With the occasion offered by the SRP, therefore, it is appropriate to define a certain, transparent framework of rules on the local level that allows the most effective use of these standards, combining the need for local development with inclusion policies” (5<sup>th</sup> Municipality SRP).

On the local municipal scale, the SRP organizes the main inspirations and larger objectives of the prison plan, which was endowed by the administration at the beginning of the 2000s and substantially represents the point of contact between the latter and the general regulatory plan. This is a strategic, planning, and management tool that really establishes the true contact between prison and city through a series of actions that relate the prison structure and its inhabitants to the quarter, the city, service-sector associations, and its inhabitants.

Returning to the prison plan, it is worth mentioning the beginning of the document: “The prison pertains to the city with all its contrasts, needs, and changes related to our time and is the place where suffering and social contradictions are the most visible, acute, and concentrated. It currently represents a true emergency in which, beyond their skills, each institution is called to intervene with renewed, incisive dedication. It seems urgent that the framework of guaranteeing inmates’ and prison workers’ rights be reinforced and redefined in light of new social processes to guarantee greater security for citizens with the concrete recovery of deviant subjects, as experience and data show” (Rome Prison Plan, 2003).

These few lines exemplify the need and desire of the tool to redesign the inter- and extramural intervention to clarify and connect interventions partially disconnected from a collective vision, pursuing common strategies and goals. In many cases, the suggested interventions randomly stretch over 360°, touching on education, professional and cultural training, mental support, and accommodation in day centres.

In light of this, the plan’s objectives can be summarized as follows: overcoming the sectoral view and fragmentation of interventions made under various headings and on different levels; complementarity and continuity of interventions with a systemic character; the plan as a point of reference for the prison population and penitentiary operators; optimization of resources and funds destined and/or for use in activities to recover and reinsert the prison population; implementation and construction where there is no collaborative rapport between territorial social services and those of the Ministry of Justice; realizing all opportunities so inmates’ rights are guaranteed; health, education

and work, equal opportunities, educational and cultural training, minimum defence; primary access to the network of social protection and work insertion services, medical care, and healthcare performance; centrality of the person and family not only as subjects for whom resources are destined, but as a resource and opportunity for community, prevention and reduction of the social, cultural, and economic causes at the base of “deviance”; flexible interventions and personalized projects in a range of different opportunities, homogeneity processes on quality criteria for accreditation of service-sectors structures that operate in the penitentiary field; and homogeneity procedures on criteria of transparency, quality, and effective social reinsertion in the implementation of calls for the entrustment of prison activities.

The tool brings together different proposals, which should then be realized by the competent departments and, through agreement protocols, even by other institutions that variously collect useful skills and resources. The plan contains programs for intervention within and outside penal institutions in order to improve prison life; offers equal opportunities for the social insertion of inmates and former inmates avoiding the spread of energy and resources; presents proposals, and develops a line of conduct and careful planning in which the intervention for the prison is registered. From a legislative point of view, the plan is based on the regulation related to the functions of local entities, in particular, “with Law 328/2000, Law 229/99 ‘Rationalization of the National Health System’, and Art. 5 of the same law ‘Reordering of Penitentiary Medicine’. These acts establish the planning and realization of an integrated system of services and social interventions with the participation of all public and private subjects, citizens, and users present in the local community. They also assign communities authority in planning, design, and creating a system of local network services, indicating priorities, supplying services and assistance, accreditation, surveillance services and residential and semi-residential structures, and defining priorities” (Citizen Prison Plan, 2003).

## **Rebibbia and the City: Inclusion, exclusion... in/out**

In what is described above, a relatively clear framework is established regarding the relationship between the Rebibbia Prison, the urban environment in which it is located, and the related urban planning tools.

If from the physical/spatial point of view there seems to be exclusion with respect to the quarter, from the non-material point of view, memory, and the collective imagination, the prison is an important centralizing and connective element in which integration and inclusion are realized through the work of the many service-sector associations operating there. The inevitable physical closure of the structure to the city, its oversized scale with respect to the urban context, its well-recognized form that immediately recalls specialized building and a completed, self-referential architectural period is voluntarily detached from the action and the work of service-sector associations. With regard to what is established in the SRP and the Rome prison plan, these aspects play a role in connecting the prison and city, a job in a perspective of reinsertion and training/cultural activities that are found outside the prison walls. The film “Caesar Must Die” is only the most striking and most recent example, as demonstrated by the list of activities carried out and, taken to the city, described in the initial part of this text.

Beyond an interpretation of the urban form and urban-planning tools, two well-known points mark a connection between the prison, the quarter, the city, and the cultural/artistic world. The writer Edoardo Albinati and the cartoonist Zerocalcare clearly define *in* and *out* of the prison. Albinati, the winner of the 2016 Strega Prize<sup>5</sup>, has taught literature to the inmates at Rebibbia Prison since around 1995. In his book *Maggio selvaggio* [Wild May], Albinati uses the first person and a diary structure to recount a year lived between the Rebibbia Prison and the outside world, gathering a year’s worth of “...all that strikes, helps, amazes, scares, and makes a person think...”. He tells about the storms of violence that exploded suddenly or were deferred, the savage humour, the random acts of kindness and cruelty, the slow drift of bodies, and the bureaucracy that pronounces the time amid the immense “fabric of punishment”. He mixes this explosive material with an impressive number of clues, discoveries, and images that instead populate the the lives of those who are free.

In contrast, the Italian cartoonist Zerocalcare<sup>6</sup> has created a mural, about 7 m by 5 m on one of the walls of the Rebibbia metro station (fig. 5.4; see list of figures).

5 Edoardo Albinati, a writer and translator, won the Strega Prize, the most important Italian literary prize, in 2016 for his latest book *The Catholic School*.

6 Zerocalcare is the pseudonym of cartoonist Michele Rech. He was born in 1983 and has published several very successful graphic novels with Bao Publishing, including *La profezia dell'armadillo* (2011), *Un polpo allagola* (2012), *Ognimaledettolunedì su due* (2013), *Dodici* (2013), and *Dimenticaiilmionome* (2014); <http://www.zerocalcare.it/>.



**Figure 5.4** The Rebibbia's surrounding murals designed by Zerocalcare. Reproduced with permission; no reuse without rightsholder permission.

The subject of the mural is a mammoth housed at Rebibbia, where Zerocalcare lives. The author often mentions the animal in his cartoons as *the other thing* that lies in his neighbourhood in addition to the prison. The origins of this motif lie in the archaeological findings in the area of Casal de' Pazzi, where various tusks from the ancient animal were found in the 1980s. For the Roman artist, the mammoth is an element of community pride in contrast to the famous prison. In the mural, a mammoth with the neighbourhood postal code, 00156, carries the artist on its shoulders. The background shows the urban panorama of the quarter, in all its beauty and contradictions. A welcome for those arriving at Rebibbia, the usual phrase "Rebibbia reigns", which is present in all his cartoons, is transformed into a dedication to the neighbourhood, a description that does not overlook the prison: "A narrow stretch of paradise between the Tiburtina and Nomentana. Land of mammoth, acetate coveralls, imprisoned bodies, and big hearts".

Finally, it is worth briefly mentioning the prison/city/political life integration of Rebibbia. The last National Conference of the Italian Radicals<sup>7</sup> was held

<sup>7</sup> Non-violent transnational and trans-party radical group.

in the Rebibbia Prison in September 2016. This was the first conference of a political party to be held within a prison structure. The dedication of the Radicals and their late leader Marco Pannella, who died a few months ago, is well known in Italian and international news. There is a civil battle aimed at improving the living conditions of inmates and improving the quality of structures that are obsolete and overpopulated. The choice to organize the first national conference after the death of Pannella precisely at Rebibbia—beyond representing a symbolic homage to the leader—represents the desire to place at the forefront a still-unresolved<sup>8</sup> battle that began years ago through the presence of and dialogue with “citizens” of Rebibbia—to use a term from the 5<sup>th</sup> Municipality SRP—without the distinction of *in* or *out*.

## References

I. Insolera, *Roma moderna*, Einaudi, 2011.

P.O. Rossi, *Roma. Guida all'architettura moderna*, Laterza, 2000.

Urbanistica n.116/2001, *Il nuovo piano di Roma*.

### URLs

<http://www.lettera43.it>

[http://www.romatiburtina.it/casaldepazzi\\_rebibbia\\_pontemammolo\\_podererosa.aspx](http://www.romatiburtina.it/casaldepazzi_rebibbia_pontemammolo_podererosa.aspx)

[http://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg\\_data\\_view.wp?liveUid=2014DAPCARD&Nome=UFF56875](http://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_data_view.wp?liveUid=2014DAPCARD&Nome=UFF56875)

[http://www.comune.roma.it/pcr/it/piano\\_regolatore\\_sociale.page](http://www.comune.roma.it/pcr/it/piano_regolatore_sociale.page)

<http://www.associazioneantigone.it>

<http://www.zerocalcare.it>

<http://www.michelucci.it/node/77>

---

8 The Italian government recently released its new prison plan, which establishes the dismantling of some historical prisons situated in large Italian cities in favour of building new structures in more decentralized areas. In the case of Rome, the plan refers to the Regina Coeli Prison.