

CRP Studio: European City
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Centocelle:
An Urban Community of Greater Rome

David Amos
Natasha Case
Paul Fraoli
Jonathan Shadmon
Rachel Weiner

Cornell-in-Rome Program

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Executive Summary

This report on the Roman community of Centocelle was produced as part of the studio class CRP 416: The European City, taught under the auspice of Prof. Bill Goldsmith, at the Cornell-in-Rome Program during the spring of 2004. In conjunction with this study, similar sociological investigations were carried out in three other Roman neighborhoods: Esquilino, Garbatella and Parioli. A preliminary note on the format of this report will be useful to the reader before proceeding further. Instead of a traditional academic format organized by subject or topic, this study takes on the form of what might be called an "episodic travelogue." The reader is taken on a guided narrative through the neighborhood according to a route an actual physical visitor to Centocelle might follow, and introduced to the sights and experiences that actual visitor might encounter. At several major points during the tour, roughly corresponding to the main sections of the report, further relevant information is elaborated to provide the reader with greater detail and an more intimate knowledge of the various aspects and important issues of the community. The map on the following page illustrates the route roughly followed by the report as it documents a narrative journey of discovery through Centocelle.

Map

Introduction

The following report is the final result of a five-month long study undertaken to examine in depth and detail a single particular neighborhood in the greater Roman metropolitan area: Centocelle. Attempts were made to study all aspects of this urban community, from social and political concerns to physical design and infrastructure, from housing statistics and population demographics to observing the state, use and condition of the public realm. While a significant amount of information was ascertained and questions answered, as is almost always the case with such social science research, some issues or inquiries remained problematic, some data remains incomplete, and much more further research could be conducted to gain a clearer picture and understanding of the true state of the neighborhood and community.

While there is no substitute for actually experiencing the community firsthand, as the average reader will not be able to do so it is thought useful to introduce the community with a set of several basic statistics, placing Centocelle in its urban and metropolitan context within the greater Roman region. The Roman metropolitan area is divided into (19) municipios, or large administrative areas (the central historic center of Rome comprises Municipio 1). Centocelle is the largest neighborhood in Municipio 7, called Prenestina, and has a population of 59,580 people (according to the 1991 Census). This is a twenty-one percent decline from the population recorded in 1981, but still makes up roughly forty-seven percent of the total overall population of Municipio Seven. Census data also indicates the Municipio's immigrant population stands at 4.7 percent, fourth lowest among all of the Roman areas' municipios. Centocelle has a density of 198 inhabitants per hectare, compared to Municipio 7's average 66.5 inhabitants per hectare, obviously indicating that the neighborhood is much more densely settled and urban than the average area in its municipio. Centocelle's population, however, is fairly young, with half the population under the age of 34, and the largest cohort between the ages of 25 and 34, of which there are 11,127 such residents.

With such an introductory basis in mind, the reader can now continue to further delve into the political, social, and economic information gathered about Centocelle over the course of this study in further detail and with a sound foundational context in place. We hope this report proves informative, revealing, surprising and even perhaps, somewhat enjoyable!

Beginnings: The History of Centocelle

Before experiencing the Centocelle of the present, an intrepid explorer might wish to learn the story of the community's past. In discussing the present urban nature of Centocelle, it is also crucial to learn of its long and often sporadic history. During Roman Imperial antiquity, Centocelle, known at the time as "*Centum Cellae*," was developed as a military stronghold outside the walled center of urban Rome. Rome had begun to marshal a significant standing army, and there was no longer sufficient space to house such a numerous military population and massive amount of fighting equipment and material within the city center. Therefore, Centocelle was founded as an extra-urban space in which the military could create an organized and centrally-focused establishment; seven kilometers outside central Rome.

Centocelle thus began its physical development as a military space, the main element of which was a huge military barracks, itself contributing to the current naming of the region; the barrack was literally a stronghold of one hundred rooms, or "*cento celle*," which had the gloomy look and feel of a military establishment. The giant building was used to house the standing army, store weaponry, and even lock up prisoners of war (who would often later become domestic servants for the Roman nobility). Interestingly, the ancient Romans also observed the Centocelle area's capability to help house a burgeoning population: indeed, *Centum Cellae* soon developed into an early suburb of central Rome, equipped with some forms of self-government, self-reliance and a somewhat independent spirit in terms of actual development.

But after the fall of the great Roman Empire, Centocelle began a long period of decay and derelict abandonment, no longer needed to serve a military purpose for the new governors of Rome. The actual area of the barracks lay dormant until archeological excavations in the region began in the 18th and 19th centuries, an activity that continues to the present day. In fact, the value of Centocelle as an archaeological resource and overall link to Roman urban history is a key element in keeping the area a priority of interest to the *Comune di Roma*.

Modern History

The year 1921 marked a key turning point for the now mostly deserted and abandoned region of Centocelle. It was in that year that the territory was taken from the ecclesiastical authority that had gained responsibility over the area during the years of the Vatican's dominion. A group of 29 selected families were then given the privilege to leave dense, urban central Rome

to construct new homes in the Centocelle region; with more open space and surrounded by greenery, this was to be a more humane environment in which to live. The project was undertaken with great idealism, surrounded by an almost utopian air. The families that resided amongst these large swaths of land could forget about the chaos of their previous urban lifestyle and return to a more rural and natural way of living. An early street system was planned and constructed; roads such as the Via dei Platani and Via delle Roinie were amongst the first to be built. These roads still exist today, though when they were first laid down they appeared more like *floreali*, or countryside streets lined with foliage, than the kind of concrete ribbons or cobblestone streets found in present day Rome. This period in Centocelle's early modern history was truly a time of independent well-being, where residents created their own community mostly free of the city they left behind.

The only major external development of note during this period of relative tranquility and sparse expansion was the creation of an important airport to the south of the neighborhood. This airport was created to serve mainly military purposes, but limited civilian use was also permitted. The placement of the airport adjacent to Centocelle was an important and interesting one, mainly because it re-introduced a major military installation to the area. Clearly a connection can be made with Centocelle's historical past; the airport decision mirrored the earlier Roman planning innovation of placing a large military installation outside of Rome to serve the entire area.

The year 1940 witnessed an important pattern of urban centralization in the area. The parochial church dedicated to Saint Felice was also constructed in this year, still today one of the major spaces in which residents of Centocelle congregate. That this Cathedral was erected during the Second World War, an unlikely time for ecclesiastical expansion, demonstrates Centocelle's steadfast social determination as well as its physical and perceived distance from the politics and events of Rome.

The post-war period was an era of basic fundamental change in Centocelle. No longer could the region remain a zone of large rural properties, but radical modifications and transformations were introduced in the area, in terms of architectonics and basic spatial layout, to accommodate the housing needs of a growing Roman population, boosted even further by refugees and immigration. The dominant housing morphology, once single-family dwelling units, was transformed into largely multi-story apartment buildings. Moderate high-rises, schools, churches, and major public spaces were all designed and constructed, changing

Centocelle into a more urban and densely inhabited zone. The days of semi-utopian dwelling in surrounding of quiet nature were over forever.

Although the post-war era of increased construction and rapid expansion produced plans for the area concerning everything from street layouts to housing regulations, many construction projects outside the various legal parameters were built as well. Because Centocelle became so suddenly desirable, local government could not keep up with the pace in which the population was growing and buildings were being constructed. The bureaucracy was also out of touch with the type of inhabitants who were moving in, and so families improvised alterations to the available housing, seeking to best suit their needs. Overall, Centocelle soon became a landscape of legal, quasi-legal and altogether illegal buildings and spaces existing side by side.

By 1979 most of this rapid development was complete. Over the last few decades, Centocelle had been transformed into a larger, more substantial, and urban community with all the basic needs anyone accustomed to living in the central city could want or need. However, aspects of the original rural ideal which Centocelle was striving to achieve could not be so easily eliminated. To this day, Centocelle maintains a definite individual character, reminiscent of its earlier independence and attitude of self-reliance. Urbanistically, construction is not as dense as in many central cities; that is to say, there are definitely several spaces and areas in the community in green and open spaces provide breathing room to the local environment. The apartment buildings, for the most part, do not stretch to great verticals, but instead remain more modest and simplistic. There also still remain some one-story homes. Also, quite a bit of green space can be found in a promenade located along several quiet side streets, and urban designers of the 1970s working in the area made a point of making sure all major boulevards had a median of trees lining down the center. Altogether, the region still maintains a quieter, less congested, and simply human aura.

Centocelle: A Neighborhood Tour

An intrepid visitor interested in experiencing contemporary Centocelle would probably begin their journey from central Rome by getting themselves to Termini, the city's main train station and transportation hub, and then taking either the number 5 or 19 trams from a few blocks away, near the center of Esquilino, all the way until reaching the main northern boundary of

Centocelle along Via Prenestina (a journey that takes, on average, approximately 30 - 45 minutes). Here one can disembark and, traveling just three blocks south from the main avenue, arrive at the first major point of interest on our tour, the Forte Prenestina.

The “Forte:” Social and Youth Activities in Centocelle

Located on via Federico Delpino, Forte Prenestino, as noted above, was constructed to serve as the main military barracks when the area of Centocelle was developed as a military stronghold outside the walled center of Rome; the barracks was a stronghold consisting of some one-hundred rooms, thus helping give rise to the name “*cento – celle,*” or “*one hundred rooms.*” After its neglect and abandonment following the fall of the Roman Empire, Forte Prenestino remained derelict and unused until it was reopened some two decades ago as a social and cultural gathering place for young Romans.

Beginning in May of 1986, after a long period of vacancy, the forte was transformed into a venue that hosts social, cultural, and political events for a wide spectrum of Rome’s younger generations. Since the reopening of this 13 hectare structure, teenagers and university-age Romans have made steady progress in developing the forte as a multi-purpose activity center. The first space to be reconstructed and put into use was the cinema, which screens a wide variety of films for viewers of all ages. During periods of warmer weather, movies are shown outside in the internal square, or old marching grounds, of the forte. The old military barracks also houses a small restaurant and bar, a tattoo and piercing parlor, an information shop selling books, literary and underground reviews, magazines, and music, and a cyberlab that offers computer services and Internet access. Since the forte is not a for-profit enterprise, all of these services are offered at low-cost or for free, allowing almost anyone to participate in the activities and utilize the services provided.¹

As a place where young Romans can gather, the forte serves as a communal venue for frequent concerts and other cultural and political events. Recently, Forte Prenestino held a 48-hour 18th-birthday celebration in honor of the original reopening of the barracks. Aside from such events held at Forte Prenestina, a youth group also organizes outings such as short mountain hikes for anyone with interest in participating. Forte Prenestina also has an official website, which lists the services offered and the dates and time of all events held at the venue. In

¹ www.forteprenestino.net

addition, there is a number of other websites that provide directions to the forte by bus, tram, and car.²

Additionally, Forte Prenestina also serves as an illegal squat, most likely for those who help organize and run the events and activities there. The government has so far not taken action to remove those living illegally at the forte because those residing there have helped develop the barracks complex as a healthy and entertaining place for young Romans to gather. If the governmental authorities were to take action, there would likely be strong protest to defend those squatting and to preserve the forte as the cultural and social center is it today. Thus, the government provides electric and water services to the forte as a means of support and encouragement in maintaining the forte's cultural and social role in the life of the Centocelle community. Just as Forte Prenestina has had a long and varied role in the history of Centocelle, it is likely to keep a vital social function as a community and entertainment center, not only for the immediate neighborhood but also the greater Roman region, in the foreseeable future.

The Next Generation: Education and Social Services in Centocelle

From the imposing gates of the Forte, one can travel west a short distance along Via F. Arena, a relatively quiet commercial street, before reaching Piazza Teofrasto and Largo G. Cocconi, a pair of interconnected open spaces with a small park in the middle, along which fronts one of the largest educational complexes in Centocelle, the Marco Polo Elementary and Giovanni Verga Middle School. Here children ages four to fourteen all congregate in the octagonal area that is the heart of northern Centocelle, for educational and social purposes. The placement of such a large educational institution in such a prominent neighborhood location underscores the value schools bring to the community, in both an educational and social sense. The small size of most schools in the neighborhood (Marco Polo is more of an exception than a common model) allows for them to have an even greater presence as local landmarks within the smaller and more individual communities of Centocelle.

Schools are plentiful and well distributed in Centocelle, with no fewer than 25 such institutions (including Catholic schools and pre-preschool centers) located in the neighborhood. Of these 25 schools, sixteen cater to the traditional grades, preschool through high school, while some are mixed, as shown in the table below.

² www.forteprenestino.net

School	Infanza	Materne	Elementare	Media	Superiore
Fausto Cecconi	X	X	X		
Andrea Doria	X	X	X		
Marco Polo/Giovanni Verga	X	X	X	X	
Amerigo Vespucci		X	X		
Renzo Pezzani		X	X		
132.O Circolo Didattico/Artigas Jose		X	X	X	
Public		X	X		
126.O Circolo Didatico			X		
G. Massaia				X	
San Benedetto				X	
Catulo Caio Valerio				X	
Grossi Tommaso				X	
Robert Kennedy				X	
San Francesco D'Assisi/Sandro Botticelli					X
G. Di Vittorio					X

Figure : *Centocelle schools and the grades they serve.*

Besides simply educating young people, schools also serve as important community and social centers. The San Benedetto Middle School on Via di Sesami, for example, also incorporates a local community sports center, akin to the famous YMCA institutions of America. They also offer music lessons there to anyone who wishes to take them. These extended social activities and programmatic offerings are not unique to this one school in Centocelle, as several others locations also provide such programs, thus transforming such schools into communal centers for neighborhood activities as well as strictly educational purposes.

Housing in Centocelle: Legacies of “Case Popolar”

Continuing west from Piazza Teofrasto along Via Federico Delpino, our traveler, after walking four blocks, would reach the main western boundary of the neighborhood, Via di Tor De Schiavi (which soon turns into Viale della Primavera). Taking a left on this avenue and heading south two short blocks, one would arrive at a large social housing complex, typical of much of the housing stock in the Centocelle community. The history, typology and continuing evolution of the area’s housing development is one of the most important elements to understand in gaining greater insight into the true nature of Centocelle.

The history of social housing in Centocelle, briefly alluded to in the above history section, is an interesting mosaic of public and private initiatives, varied styles of construction, and legal and illegal undertakings. All of these varied typologies can be observed in different

relax. But soon this era began to witness a rapid growth in population, and so many designs began to be modified or ignored to accommodate this rapid change and influx of new population as needs dictated. Consequently, although comprehensive plans had been designed and construction initiated, this process of housing provision was unable to keep up with the rapid growth in population and accelerated demands for government-provided housing the neighborhood was experiencing. Many lower-class Romans, or immigrant groups from elsewhere, thus moved into half-completed or abandoned housing projects and completed construction themselves, according to their own specifications, desires, needs or wants. Due to this process, many of the apartments have illegal additions, unsafe construction methods, or overcrowded spaces, poorly lit and oftentimes lacking adequate services such as electricity or plumbing. Although these illegal buildings were constructed in an unorganized or haphazard manner, many such constructions still display a remarkable uniformity as regards neighborhood standards in such aspects as color, height, allotted courtyard spaces or exterior green space.

Modern Housing Patterns and an Influx of Immigrants

Having observed important examples of social housing and learned about some of the historical patterns of residential development in the neighborhood, our traveler might naturally be interested in learning about some of the more contemporary patterns of housing residency and demographic trends in Centocelle. In the years between 1981 and 1991, census data showed that Centocelle lost a full twenty-one percent of its population. Yet in actively observing the neighborhood, one would see no signs of the wholesale neglect or abandonment one might normally associate with such a dramatic decline in population. To the contrary, Centocelle still seems stable and even vibrant. If anything, the neighborhood seems to have gained an increasing immigrant population, observable on trams and buses, in the markets, and even campaign posters plastered in shop windows and seemingly ever other available surface. This paradox can be accounted for by a decline in the number of native Italians living in Centocelle, accompanied by a corresponding increase of undocumented immigrants who make their homes in the community. In a disturbing pattern also observed in other areas of Rome, landlords in Centocelle increasingly let their dissatisfied, native Italian tenants move out and then fill their apartments or residential units with immigrant families, legal or illegal; while the average Italian can most often afford to pay more rent than the average immigrant, they can usually not afford to outspend three, five, or

even more. The landlord then simply reports to the State that the apartment remains vacant while making an increased profit on the property.

The evidence behind such patterns lies in several available statistical indicators that can be used to examine such issues in Centocelle, such as comparing the vacancy rates in Centocelle to those in Rome. The overall vacancy rate in Centocelle has increased a significant 4.1 percent between 1981 and 1991, while Rome's has only crept up by a paltry 0.4 percent. Most importantly, however, the type of vacancy rates reported have changed dramatically in Centocelle, especially when compared to Rome. Both currently exhibit an about eleven to twelve percent vacancy rate, but while a third of Rome's vacancies (33.3 percent) are reported as being due to vacationers, work, or other uses, a full 66.3 percent (almost double Rome's rate) of Centocelle's vacancies were simply registered as unoccupied, deemed "for rent or sale." The 66.3 percent is up from 36.9 percent in 1981, a more reasonable number and closer to Rome's level of unoccupied properties. Such contrasts are evident in the table reproduced below.

Vacancy Categories	Centocelle	Rome
Overall Vacancy Rate	11.8	11.6
For Rent or Sale	66.3	26.4
Utilized for Vacation	8.6	18.3
Utilized for Work	12.0	15.0
Other	13.0	14.2

Figure : Housing vacancy rates in Centocelle and Rome.

Such phenomena are hard to track and understand in meaningful ways besides through using inferential statistical comparison. In fact, the official census data found that in Municipio Seven, only 4.7 percent of the population were non-Italians, the fourth lowest percentage in the Rome metropolitan area. Since this statistical anomaly results mainly from the influx of unreported and undocumented illegal immigrants, the best information to be gained about such issues is through direct experience or active observation. Feruccio Rossini, president of S.I.C.E.T., a national tenants union headquartered in Rome, has seen cases in Esquilino, a neighborhood in Rome with a substantial immigrant population, where as many as twenty immigrants were packed into an apartment meant for a family of five. The population influx in Esquilino is currently shifting from poorer immigrant renters to Chinese immigrants who often

buy their apartments or residential units instead, so the phenomenon is not as common in that area anymore. In Centocelle, however, there seems to be a rapacious need for cheap immigrant housing, and the Esquilino model can be made to function just as well in Centocelle. The shanty town that has arisen along the borders of the old airport and other informal housing developments elsewhere in the neighborhood demonstrate the continued demands for low cost housing in the area. A further issue exacerbating the problem is the policy of the Italian state to not allow immigrants, documented or undocumented, to rent public housing units (documented or legal immigrants may rent such units eventually, but only after an extremely long waiting period, sometimes up to a decade or more). Since these subsidized units are the only apartments within economic reach of many such immigrants, they are often forced to pack themselves in large groups under substandard conditions, forcing an ever greater number of native Italian tenants out of their units as landlords seek to cash in on the immigrant phenomena.

Transportation – Getting To, From, and Around Centocelle

Taking a left of Viale della Primavera and heading back east along Viale delle Gardenie for four blocks, one would reach the physical, commercial and transportation center of Centocelle: Piazza del Gerani. From here, one can watch trams and buses arrive and leave, full of people going about, conducting their daily affairs. This might make our traveler more curious about Centocelle's transportation options, and its connectivity, or lack thereof, with other areas within the Roman metropolitan region. Located approximately forty-five minutes by tram from Rome's central transportation hub, Stazione Termini, Centocelle is well served by public transportation, consisting of several tram and bus lines. The three tram lines that service the Centocelle area center along Via Prenestina. While tram line 14 terminates shortly after turning onto Viale Palmiro Togliatti (the main eastern boundary of the neighborhood) from Via Prenestina, the final stops for tram lines 5 and 19 are located in Piazza dei Gerani, at the intersection of Via dei Castani and Viale della Gardenie, the central intersection for the entire area. In addition to these three tram lines, twelve bus routes also serve the Centocelle area. The major bus stop locations are in Piazza dei Gerani and in Piazza dei Mirti. Those commuting from Centocelle to the historic center of Rome, and vice-versa, would experience a great reduction in travel time and increase in ease of use if a long-discussed third metro line, or "Linea C," that

However, because funding for many Jubilee projects was not secured until late 1997, the Linea C project, of tremendous complexity and scope, was soon set aside. Since then, the idea to preserve with construction on the line has been revived on many occasions, probably due to the insistence of citizens like those in Centocelle and other neighborhoods whom the new line would benefit most. The new trains could carry a maximum of 1,200 people every 3 minutes, at speeds up to 35 km/h (including stops)⁴ to and from Centocelle, and would provide impetus for a revolutionary change in how people think about living and working not only in Centocelle, but also in the city center and other peripheral Roman communities.

Today, the project is nevertheless considered “in progress” because much of the preliminary planning and design work has been completed, and the necessary archaeological explorations are underway for tunnel-digging to begin in earnest. Interestingly, the tunnels will run 20 to 35 meters deep, completely below any archaeological strata of importance, leaving undiscovered relics from antiquity untouched—an issue of great importance in the eastern part of Centocelle, since the tunnels will have to be built directly beneath ongoing archeological excavations. Actual work has also begun in southern Centocelle, preparing light-rail commuter trains from Pantano for conversion to underground tunnels. The planned route of this system is shown below:

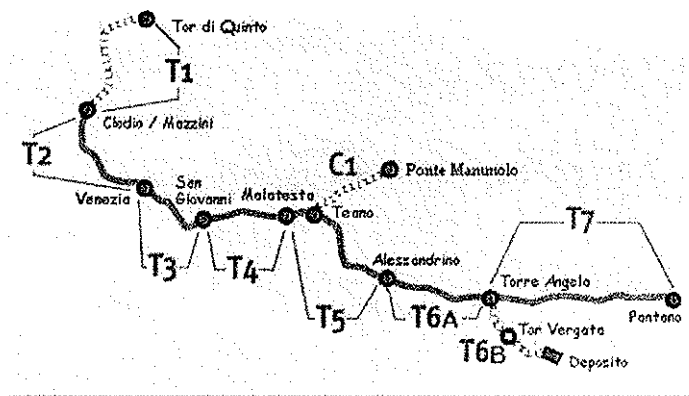


Figure : Planned route of underground light-rail system.

The “T4” and “T5” sections, which already have the necessary funding secured and appropriated, will be built first — “7.5 km and 9 stations between San Giovanni and

⁴ Ibid.

would serve Centocelle were actually constructed. It is to these future prospects for more efficient transportation to and from Centocelle that we now turn.

Transportation Future: A Better Connected Centocelle?

In the years leading up to 2000 and the Catholic Jubilee (the 2000th anniversary of Christ's birthday), the Comune di Roma planned an extensive renovation and expansion of the city's public transportation infrastructure in response to the tremendous increase in religious pilgrimages that were anticipated for the grand occasion. The most exciting and transformative of these changes was to be the complete renewal of the city's decaying Metropolitana underground system, including the addition of a new, third line, Linea C. Linea C was "to cross the whole city like a backbone following a north-west/south-east direction,"³ stretching from Prati to the Vatican, through the Field of Mars and Piazza Venezia, past the Colosseum, and was to continue further east, with three different stops in Centocelle — 32 km long in total with 42 different stations. The location of the three Linea C stops planned for Centocelle are shown here:

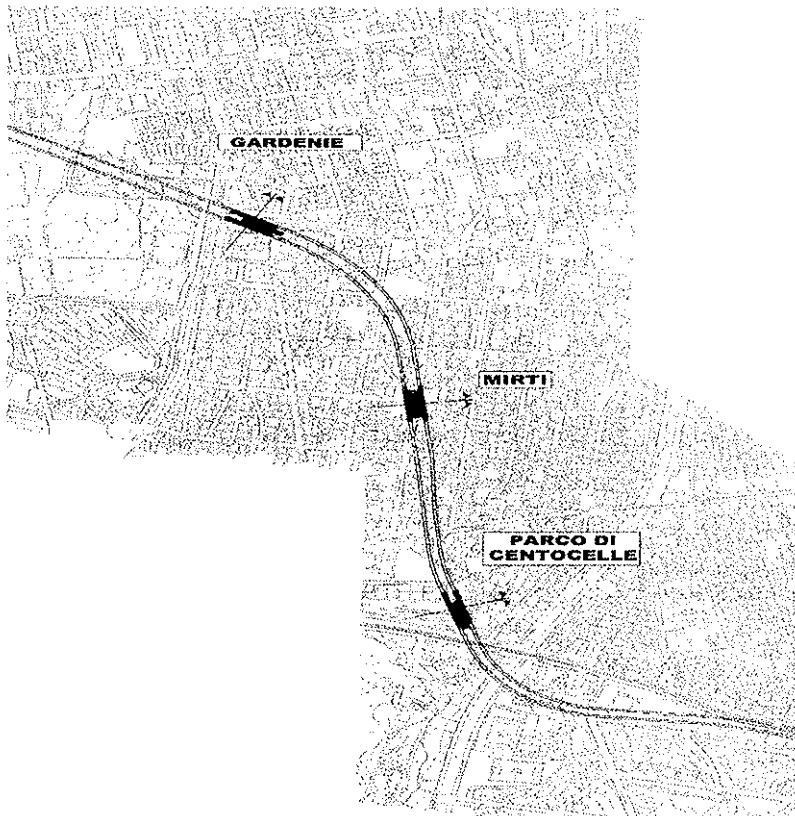


Figure : Location of the three Linea C metro stops planned in Centocelle.

³ http://www.emta.com/rome_news.htm

Alessandrino, [which] will cost 0.92 billion €, and will be jointly funded by the Italian state (60%) and the Municipality of Rome (40%).”⁵

Though there are currently no definite planned dates of completion, the segment of the new line running through Centocelle now seems almost certain to be built, linking it at first to San Giovanni in Laterano, where connection to the city center takes only minutes by bus. Such progress also bodes well for the prospects of eventual construction of Linea C and its three planned stops in Centocelle. The new Metropolitana station planned for Via Casilina, on the southern boundary of the neighborhood, will certainly provide an impetus for renewed redevelopment efforts in that entire area, including the planned but currently stalled conversion of the now-vacant Parco di Centocelle across on the south side of the avenue into a grand, landscaped public green space and archaeological preserve. Perhaps most importantly, such improved transportation infrastructure linking Centocelle more efficiently and rapidly with Rome and other peripheral communities of the metropolitan area will have profound effects on how the neighborhood is viewed in the collective minds of residents in the whole region, and is sure to effect, in as yet unknown ways, the types, numbers and socioeconomic status of the groups of people who choose to stay and live in Centocelle, or vice-versa.

Green Space and Urban Design: The Fabric of Centocelle

Continuing eastward along Viale delle Gardenie from Piazza dei Gerani, one reaches Piazza d. Larici and the large Parco de Madre Teresa after a short stroll of only two blocks. Here, in the lush and shady scenery of the community’s largest park, our traveler could make the wise decision to enjoy a moment of rest and relaxation while pondering the condition of public space and the green, open areas of Centocelle.

One of the most interesting characteristics of Centocelle is the varied and numerous provision of parks and open green spaces for a neighborhood presently considered so unalterably urban. The main such open green space is where our traveler currently finds themselves, the large Parco de Madre Teresa public park, located along the central western edge of the neighborhood on a sloping promontory that provides, weather permitting, beautiful views of the other peripheral communities and distant mountains to the east. This park is largely well-

⁵ Ibid.

locations throughout the neighborhood, seemingly independent of the other but together creating a housing situation typified by collage, invention and juxtaposition.

The first development of regular dwellings was constructed in 1921, which consisted of one-story, single family homes. Twenty-nine families from central Rome were allotted plots of land in the Centocelle area, considerably far apart from one another. They were to preserve the green nature and open space of these zones and build and live minimally, in an environment that would serve as a stark contrast to the “cesspool” and dense and polluted nature of the city center. Roads were smoothed, but not paved, so that residents could have some connection to one another while little or no regular transportation services were provided to the center of Rome.

The nature of Centocelle changed radically during the 1940s and 50’s, however. This period saw the first dramatic wave of government-constructed housing erected, housing built by the *casa popolare* council. This council had broad responsibility for the construction and provision of social housing in the Roman region, among other things enumerating required sq. footage per resident and the necessary proportions of government-constructed apartments and residential spaces at the time. The general designs were basic and minimalist in nature, consisting of rectangular buildings of moderate height with simple functional apartments arranged in groups of three or four per floor. An interesting example of this kind of construction is the group of *casa popolare* apartment buildings located at along the Via Fuggi, fronting along Via di Tor de Schiavi. These units are located in higher apartment blocks, rising between seven and nine floors, arranged in a grid pattern with a central courtyard and recreational space to serve the area’s residents. There is also ample reserved parking space for the complex’s residents, a rare luxury in central, and sometimes even in peripheral, Rome. The high rises are all painted the same color, a light tan confection; while a few have balconies, the buildings mainly consist of flat, uniform facades. This particular housing complex, built by the public administration, has remained in public hands ever since, unlike many others which have since been privatized.

The *casa popolare* council was also involved in further apartment construction activities throughout the 1970s and 80s. During this period, many of the one-story homes with exterior gardens that characterized Centocelle’s housing stock were converted into larger apartment blocks, with fewer areas of intervening green or open space. However, these apartment blocks were careful to observe the original layout, and maintained proper central courtyards that were equipped with gardens, plants, trees, and generally secluded places within which to socialize and

maintained, with cut grass, groomed and mature shade trees, numerous trash receptacles, plentiful benches and many play areas for children, even including a small carnival/festival area in the northeast corner. While the quality of maintenance and high usage of the park might be related to the fact that the adjacent Santa Maria Theresa church helps to fund and maintain such activities, the simple fact of the park's central location in relation to the rest of Centocelle and the fact that it is the largest and most spacious park in the area also contribute to the central role the park plays in the social and communal life of the neighborhood.

In addition to this large open green space, there are also several "pocket parks" located in various areas and spatial nodes throughout the community, such as those located at Piazzale d. Gardenie, Piazza d. Larici, Piazzale Borgata Alessandrina, and Piazza d. Santa Felice da Cantalice. These small open spaces vary widely in type and character, but most are located at major intersections or community nodes, are surrounded by retail or commercial establishments, or are anchored by a major civic or community institution, such as a school (Piazzale d. Gardenie) or church (Piazza Cantalice). However, these small open spaces or parks often exhibit a more problematic appearance than the large and central Parco Madre Teresa, with most consisting of not much more than a large, bare concrete space or an unadorned, expansive patch of overgrown or patchy grass. These small parks or open areas are often also ill-maintained, with trash, animal waste, graffiti or old and broken furniture more prevalent than not. Despite these problems, however, on the days these spaces were observed with fair weather, the areas were nevertheless being fairly heavily utilized, with people strolling, walking pets, or families enjoying recreational outings.

While comfortably situated on a park bench, observing the pleasant natural surroundings or engaging in some lively people-watching, our traveler might also want to consider the history and organization of Centocelle's built environment. The general spatial organization and street layout of Centocelle gives an informed observer the impression of a community structured along an urban hierarchy of streets and spaces. The avenue of Via del Castani provides a main north-south axis that divides the community almost evenly in two, with other main north-south routes including Via d. Orchidee, Via Dei Noci, and Via Tor de Schiavi. Main east-west routes include Via Federico Delpino, Viale delle Gardenie, and Via dei Glicini. These main streets and avenues are similar in appearance and use to comparable urban thoroughfares elsewhere, with heavy commercial and automobile traffic, congested parking, a loud ambient noise level, larger

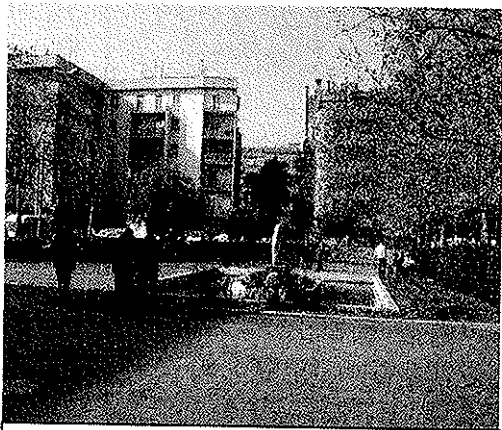
buildings, considerable pedestrian traffic and almost the entire array of commercial, retail and service establishments. Thus, these main streets, like similar ones in urban communities almost everywhere, can be said to constitute the true urban heart of the Centocelle neighborhood.

Meanwhile, the majority of the Centocelle community consists of secondary and tertiary streets and roads along running through areas which comprise the main residential sectors of the neighborhood. While there are some residential regions which also host retail, commercial or service establishments (mainly surrounding some of the secondary public spaces discussed below) many of the residential areas in Centocelle are segregated, single-use areas, part of which reflects the original plan and zoning scheme devised for the community by municipal authorities before it began to seriously develop in the 1960s and 70s. However, there is also considerable variety within the residential neighborhoods in Centocelle, with the northern areas above Viale delle Gardenie seeming to consist of the best housing stock along the quietest, best-maintained streets, while the central areas to the south of Viale delle Gardenie and along Via dei Castani mainly consist of large, multi-story apartment blocks built above a floor of ground-level retail. Meanwhile, the areas to the southwest and extreme southeast of Centocelle seem to consist of the lowest-quality, even informal housing stock, while the northeast area contains a large block of severe, Corbusian-style social-housing developments.

The main borders of the community consist of Via Prenestina to the north, Via Casilina to the south, Viale della Primavera to the east and Viale Palmiro to the west. These are all large, urban thoroughfares, with dual-direction multi-lane traffic and the trams and bus lines that serve to connect the neighborhood with central and greater Rome. While they seem to provide definitive geographic demarcation around this section of Centocelle, they also seem to serve as somewhat of a concrete, yet still porous, boundaries. But as strictly public space, they are formidable barriers which are not easy or pleasant to cross by foot.

As our traveler leaves their quiet moment of repose to continue on their exploratory trek through Centocelle, they might be tempted to think about the other types of public spaces that constitute the urban fabric of the community, perhaps as they make their way along Via degli Abeti southwest, back towards Piazza dei Gerani and Via dei Castani. These spaces also present a multitude of typologies, characters, and uses, which present another facet of urban public life in the neighborhood. Four main examples of such spaces include Piazza dei Gerani (the

geographical and urban heart of the community), Piazza de Mirti (located south of Piazza dei Gerani along Via dei Castani), the aforementioned Piazza Teofrasto to the north, and the interconnected spatial complex of Largo Mola di Bari and Piazza del Quarticciolo in the extreme northeast region of the neighborhood. An examination of the physical characteristics and social uses of these four main spaces will provide a good introductory picture of the types and roles of the varied urban public spaces prevalent in Centocelle.



Piazza dei Gerani

Piazza dei Gerani, as remarked above, marks the central geographic, commercial and transportation heart of the neighborhood. As befits such a central urban space, the area is surrounded by numerous service, retail and commercial establishments serving almost every normal need, and many restaurants and street vendors serve to create a lively urban atmosphere. Several bus and tram lines also converge at this point, providing public transportation into and out of Centocelle, while

the central piazza has a fountain and ample seating areas which were being heavily utilized (when observed) by many groups of people engaged in various activities, from sitting and talking in groups to strolling or eating a midday meal. Piazza de Mirti, meanwhile, is a different type of public space, yet is also extensively used. Consisting mainly of a large traffic circle with a large, oval central green space, there is nevertheless heavy foot traffic, a small carousel for children at the southeastern corner, and many restaurants and service establishments on the ground floor of large, multi-storey apartment buildings, a distinctly urban milieu. To the north, Piazza Teofrasto presents yet another type of urban public space, dominated by a large, concrete sculptural structure in a large, open concrete plaza, nevertheless made fairly hospitable by the presence of large shade trees and grass border areas. Yet when observed, despite the presence of a large church and apartment buildings nearby, this space was almost completely devoid of people or activity. Finally, the interconnected spaces of Largo Mola di Bari and Piazza del Quarticciolo, in the northeastern region of the neighborhood, consist of large, rectangular open spaces in the median area of split roads, on a north-south axial orientation. Despite ample, and rather impressive, provision of furniture, statuary, large mature trees and even a fountain, however, these spaces were completely empty of public users when observed, which might have to do with

the rather lackluster or seemingly nonexistent maintenance of the structures indicated by such characteristics as rampant graffiti, a large amount of uncollected trash and old or seemingly broken street furniture and decorative elements.

Social interaction and activity in Centocelle was not only observed in areas that could be typically labeled “urban public space” such as piazzas or parks, however, but was also seen in the regular streets and spaces which comprise the vast majority of the urban fabric of Centocelle. The most salient example of such urban social activity is the food and vendor market that takes place daily from mid-morning to early-afternoon along the streets of Via Dei Noci, Via delle Giunchiglie and Via dei Platani, between Piazza dei Gerani and Piazza de Mirti and just east of



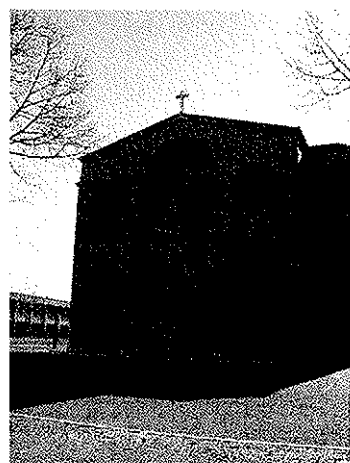
Via dei Castani. However this is not to be the market’s location for long; following a citywide policy being pushed by Rome’s city planners and municipal authorities to centralize and consolidate most of the region’s outdoor or informal markets in new, purpose-built indoor locations, the Centocelle market will soon move to a new, indoor facility being constructed for this purpose near Via Trinchieri, on the western side of Viale della Primavera, adjacent to the large social housing development near this location discussed earlier. While this move will no doubt increase transportation efficiencies for food and other materials traveling to and from the market and provide better facilities

for both vendors and customers, it will further the market’s location from a significant portion of the Centocelle community by a considerable distance, and will no doubt make it harder for many residents of the neighborhood to patronize the market on a regular basis. The wisdom of this larger policy concerning the centralization and consolidation of the Rome region’s markets is yet to be fully proven. An older indoor market building was also observed near Piazza del Quarticciolo along Via Castellaneta, but it was not apparent whether it was still functional or whether it had been permanently boarded up. Besides such market areas or regions of commercial activity, numerous shady lanes, semi-private courtyards, neighborhood bars and street-side cafes seemed to be arenas for social interaction between the residents of Centocelle.

Reaching Via dei Castani, turning left and heading south, our traveler now finds themselves on the community's main thoroughfare. Appropriately, many of the community's retail and service establishments are centered along this avenue, where residents of Centocelle can find everything from real estate offices to hairdressers to supermarkets to numerous *trattorias*. Being the main commercial and transportation artery of the community, Via dei Castani is suitably lively and noisy during most times of the day, with heavy automotive traffic, several bus lines plying their routes, trams traveling to and from Piazza dei Gerani, and heavy pedestrian traffic of all types. But when visited at night, the street and surrounding areas take on a decidedly more suburban appearance and atmosphere, with most establishments closed by seven or eight at night, after which this main avenue becomes eerily dim and quiet and pedestrians are few and far between.

Religious and Social Life in Centocelle

Reaching the southern end of the Via dei Castani, the traveler comes upon one of the first and most important churches in Centocelle, Santa Felice da Cantalice. Construction on the church itself was begun in 1940, and completed several years later. The fact that it was able to undergo such construction during the Second World War is a testament to Centocelle's ability to determinedly persevere with architectural projects in an independent fashion, despite all the turmoil that raked Mussolini's Rome throughout this period and after liberation by the Allies in 1943.



The church is designed in a modern, minimalist style, constructed mostly with brickwork and cement. There is little to no elaboration of architectural motif, nor any attribution paid to the ornate baroque style of so many more famous central Roman churches. However, the nature of the building does lend itself to a kind of official monumentality, providing a fitting crown to the end of the grand Via Castani, one of the oldest and most important boulevards in the community. The church sits in a symmetrical orientation, the tallest monument in the skyline from a distance; in this way it is easily identified and highly accessible to all those in need. When the church was completed, it

must have given a sense of true dignity to residents of Centocelle, both socially, spiritually and in terms of urban aesthetics.

But perhaps more important than the church itself, with its stark but strong exterior and its basic functional interior, is the nature of the space surrounding it. Next to the church sits the oratorium and administration building. Here is where the cardinal of the church, presently a Korean, presides. He is accompanied and assisted by various social workers, who perform such tasks as arranging daycare programs and recreational activities, working with the poor and underserved, providing personal counseling, assistance with immigration issues and other projects. The play yards and athletic spaces behind and next to the church are used in efforts to involve the community in positive activities through which members of Centocelle learn to work together, communicate, and learn the moral values of the religious offerings of the church. Thus for this neighborhood, and the larger community as a whole, Santa Felice da Cantalice is a crucial element in centralizing life, and plays an important role in helping to protect many Centocelle residents against some of the difficulties of urban existence.

One way that Centocelle is able to orient its collective social life from both a communal and spatial perspective is through the existence and operation of the community's several churches and religious/charitable organizations. After the construction of Santa da Cantalice at the end of Via dei Castani, the dominant artery of the neighborhood, several other churches, constructed in a similar style, were also built, dispersed throughout the community. Another church further north along Via Dei Castani was also constructed, which also offers sports and recreational activities, educational programming, social counseling and other communal services. This church was completed later in the 1940s.

Another major church was built right near the Parco di Madre Theresa. This church was also constructed in a modern and minimalist aesthetic, but in contrast to other earlier churches, was instead decorated in white stucco, a difference that can be attributed to its later date of construction. It has a particularly interesting architectural role, as it sits framed by this lush, green park that many locals use as a place to take an afternoon break, gather and talk on the benches, or to stroll across its slowly grading hills. The church offers another way to appreciate this spacious setting; instead of speaking with friends, one could also venture into the church for a moment of silence, participation in a sermon, or a private conversation with God. In these

ways, this church too fulfills several important social, religious and spiritual functions, typical of the churches and religious institutions of Centocelle.

Overall, although many of the churches in the community are guised in a more modern or contemporary (at least at the time of their construction) architectural shell, these churches still provide similar religious services as some of the more renowned or popularly recognized churches of Rome's *centro storico*, while also fulfilling important communal and social functions that are just as important, if perhaps not more, to the residents of Centocelle. Perhaps, un-trammeled by rampant tourist groups, they are able to preserve a greater capability in maintaining the purity of their religious and social function to help members of the Centocelle community.

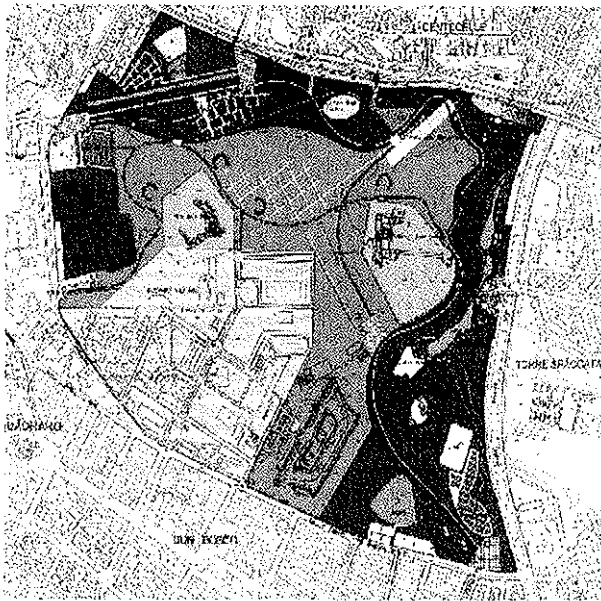
Urban Redevelopment – Radical Change for the Future?

The traveler, continuing from the southern terminus of the Via dei Castani past the imposing façade of San Felice da Cantalice and through the bus-laden, heavily-trafficked Piazza di Camelie, arrives at the second main arterial road connecting Centocelle to the city center—Via Casilina, which also serves as the geographical southern boundary of the area. Sunk ten or fifteen feet below the streets just north of it (perhaps because of its state of constant operation and maintenance since antiquity), a giant concrete retaining wall was built to account for the change in elevation over the years, similar to those holding back the Tiber River in central Rome. This wall has also preserved the road's considerable width - consisting of three traffic lanes plus entry/exit lanes in each direction - allowing the numerous eastern suburban tram lines to run along the avenue's median in a dedicated rail right-of-way.

Across the Via Casilina to the south, a vast tract of green open space, *il parco di Centocelle*, remains undeveloped and inhabited mainly by transient squatters passing in and out of the small tar-shacks that have been built along the area's periphery. Though the large area boasts a great historical richness—home to Roman *necropoli*, Constantine's mother's private villa, and the villa *ad Duas Lauros* in antiquity, and Rome's first airport, site of a Wright Brothers' flight, in the 20th century—plans for its redevelopment have fallen victim to bureaucratic wrangling and fundraising difficulties. The goal for planning in the area had been to blend architectural relics with landscaped green and open space, as well as modern recreational facilities, to create a "life-giving 'lung' for the men, women and children of

Centocelle.”⁶ Though an international design-ideas competition was hosted in the late 1990s, and submissions received for transformations of the area into a large park from some of the world’s most prominent architects and top planners, implementation of the winning design has not yet commenced.

In November of 2003, residents tired of waiting for concrete plans to develop and this promising vision to begin coming to fruition inaugurated an educational center for school-children and scholars on Via Glicini dedicated to their rich, local historical patrimony: the “Centro Informativo e Didattico.”⁷ Though the Commune di Roma now claims that the necessary funds are earmarked and that redevelopment of the park area will begin shortly, many in the community remain skeptical, despite prominent promises that these efforts will provide numerous jobs to Centocelle residents (as advertised on the front page of the city’s official urbanistica website).⁸ A group of concerned citizens, the *Amici del Parco*, met most recently at an art gallery on Via Castani, *Il Mondo dell'Arte*, on February 25th, 2004, to encourage continued progress in the redevelopment process and publicly exhibit plans for the construction of a new



bridge across Via Casilina, in conjunction with the planned station for the Metro line C, to reach the new park.⁹

The redevelopment of the large park area, located between the southern boundary of Centocelle and the now-decommissioned former military airport, will have several significant impacts for the community in the near future if successfully initiated. Most significantly, such efforts would replace the scarred landscape along Via Casilina, improve the public transportation systems in the area (even without

the new Metro line, currently a distant prospect at best), and force the city to deal in a constructive way with the squatter village and large transient population that have taken up

⁶ Have to find

⁷ www.abitarearoma.net/giornale/aprile2-04/-c-poloArcheologico.htm

⁸ www.urbanistica.roma.it

⁹ www.abitarearoma.net/giornale/febbraio3-04/-7-mostra.htm

residence in the area. On December 28, 2003, a dangerous fire, accompanied by several explosions, began in the squatter area of the park for as yet unexplained reasons, taking hours to extinguish.¹⁰ Residents are hoping that this incident will only add to the incentive for Comune di Roma officials to act, sooner rather than later, in moving to allocate funds, create jobs, and bring renewed life to this needlessly underdeveloped section of eastern Rome through successful redevelopment efforts. On the failure or success of such efforts rest much of the social, economic and physical prospects of the Centocelle community in the near future.

¹⁰ www.abitarearoma.net/giornale/gennaio1-04/c-incendio.htm

Conclusion

The neighborhood of Centocelle can thus be viewed as a diverse, vibrant and urban community, which nevertheless has distinct social and economic problems and issues to overcome if it is to be assured of future success and continued vitality. In this respect, although the particulars might diverge in scope, scale, measure and type, Centocelle is not that dissimilar from many such peripheral urban communities in metropolitan regions both elsewhere in Europe and indeed, across the globe.

Centocelle faces distinct social, political, and economic issues that both political and civilian leadership, community groups, and private citizens must address to assure a more equitable and progressive social future. These include the issue of illegal immigration and the increasing rates of native Italian tenants being evicted in favor of such immigrants, willing to pay high rents by living as several families together in apartments or units often only meant for one family of four or five; the ongoing privatization of many *casa popolare* housing developments that increasingly put private housing out of financial reach for many of the area's lower and working class populations; and the social and cultural frictions that arise from an increase in residents of foreign birth or ethnicities and their integration into Italian society. All these issues, potential catalysts of political and cultural conflict, will continue to play themselves out in Centocelle in the decades ahead.

While the community faces several distinct yet interconnected social and political issues, massive physical transformation is also on the agenda, despite how ephemeral many such government plans often seem to the residents of Centocelle (or residents of any Italian city, for that matter). The planned transformation of the Parco di Centocelle into a large regional greenspace and attraction, as well as the planned construction of the Metropolitana Linea C, will have significant physical, social and economic consequences for the area when (and if) completed. These two projects would both serve to tie and integrate Centocelle into the Roman metropolitan area much more efficiently and effectively than ever before, while also providing a large regional amenity that would serve to attract many more people, residents and visitors to the Centocelle area. These results would surely introduce greater economic pressures and social conflict between native residents and probably more-affluent newcomers, as the area might start

to gentrify. All these issues and impending projects will also serve to shape the future direction of the Centocelle community in the next few years.

Centocelle has had a long and varied history and an interesting and eventful present. The next few decades will probably see significant changes, with consequences yet to be seen but which will probably consist of both positive and negative outcomes. What one might hope is that, whatever the future may bring, Centocelle will not lose its distinctive sense of communal identity that has helped characterize the community and its residents in the past.

A Brief Note on Methodology

Numerous sources and strategies were used in the compilation of this report, not without their difficulties or weaknesses. The most basic statistical information came from a broad-based neighborhood street survey, based on the form reproduced on the next page. Every single street in the neighborhood was surveyed for some basic information, including traffic, noise, parking, and greenery. Most measurements were taken on a standardized yet arbitrary three point scale. For questions relating to pedestrian and auto traffic, the scale was adjusted to take into account the afternoon break, though most surveying was done before this part of the day.

A second survey, more detailed set of surveys was conducted after the results of the first survey had been organized and analyzed. This second survey system focused on fifteen "street segments" chosen as representative of a specific local area common to that specific precinct in the neighborhood. Surveyors were asked to record the exact number of people on the segment at when observed, as well as record all of the commercial, retail or service establishments on that segment, if possible and applicable. These surveys were also conducted mostly in the morning on one day, in an effort to make the data somewhat standard and comparable.

Other information gathered by the group came from informal, unscientific discussions or interviews with residents about issues like traffic, quality-of-life, and other basic neighborhood characteristics. These interviews are not included in the paper as empirical or even anecdotal evidence, but instead simply helped guide the researchers' thought processes, helping to point out new directions for further study or research. Two formal interviews were conducted for the purpose of gathering information to be used in the paper itself. The first was with Feruccio Rossini, the president of S.I.C.E.T, and the second was with [Person], a [Job] at the local municipio office.

Further sources of information were located on the Internet; websites belonging to Municipio Seven and several local community groups were especially useful. With municipio data, however, the scope of official data provided in such forms as census data covers the entire municipio, while Centocelle comprises only roughly fifty percent of Municipio Seven, in which it is located. Unfortunately for the social science researcher, such official data is not yet provided by authorities broken down into individual municipios. Therefore while we believe that most of the Municipio data is useful and fairly accurate to use for some measures, inconsistencies may exist due to the larger scope of the data. Statistical information from the 1981 and 1991 official censuses were also used, and obviously these data sets are somewhat out of date, although they were the most recent numbers available at the time this report was composed. We realize that much has changed in the thirteen years since the 1991 data was gathered, but are forced to make do with what is currently available.

Thank You Note

We, the members of the Centocelle research group, wish to thank several people without whom the completion of this paper and semester would not have been possible. These include foremost Prof. Bill Goldsmith, Prof. Gregory Smith, and our tireless graduate teaching assistants, Stephano and Massimo (or is it Massimo and Stephano?). We would also like to thank the entire faculty and staff of the Cornell-in-Rome Program during the spring 2004 for making this truly a semester to remember.

Dedication

We would also like to take this time to dedicate this paper to the people and residents of Centocelle, who have endured the design and abandonment of many plans for a better future; we hope that this paper serves in some small way to help realize the beginning of a real process of positive transformation in an area which truly deserves it.