

# Walking Nolli: Cartography and Choreography as a Study Abroad Introduction

PETER P. GOICHE  
Iowa State University

THOMAS LESLIE  
Iowa State University

KAREN R. BERMANN  
Iowa State University

CHRISTOPHER KLING  
Iowa State University

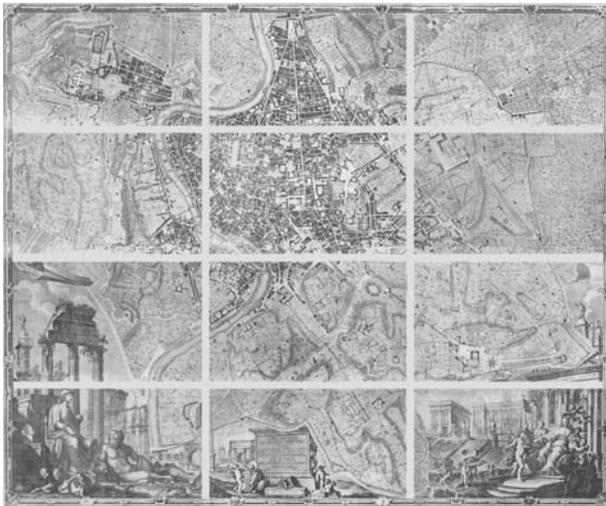


Figure 1. The 1748 Nolli Map

## INTRODUCTION

The authors co-taught and organized a semester-long study abroad program for 48 students in Rome, where our College maintains a full-time studio and facilities on the Piazza Cinque Scuole, a location

in the heart of the old Jewish Ghetto. In parallel with several charrette studio offerings and traditional sketchbook and history classes, we offered a two-week introductory project that operated on two levels. On a practical level, we wanted to provide students with a framework for exploring the city, for getting beyond the *centro* and figuring out Rome's patterns, major routes, and transit on their own. On a deeper level, however, we wanted students to gain exposure to the layered history of the city, and to confront the dichotomy between experiential and abstract notions of space. We wanted them, right away, to understand the city as both an archeological and a navigational situation, and to reconcile the often-considerable gulf between historical information and lived experience.

The result was a project that relied on three artifacts: the 1748 Map of Rome by Giambattista Nolli, the current "map" of Rome via Google Earth (these first two were aided in no small part by the University of Oregon's online Nolli project), and the city itself as traversed by students over a 48-hour, delineated act of urban choreography. We treated the Nolli Map as both an historical artifact, offering a series of introductory lectures by noted Nolli scholar

and Rome resident Allan Ceen, and as a navigational device, asking students to study, walk, and re-map one linear sector of the original 1748 Map.

### TACTILE CONSTRUCTION

Before leaving for Rome, students were asked to prepare two physical maps using our department's laser cutter and Adobe Illustrator. The first map was a tactile version of the Nolli. Students were assigned in pairs one of twenty-four vertical strips of the map, and act of cutting that we recognized as productively sacrilegious, and asked to trace the resulting narrow strip digitally, taking the time to become familiar with a very intimate portion of the Map's legendary complexity and detail. This digital file became the basis for wood etchings that, when placed side-by-side, formed a complete, 600mm x 2000mm version of the original Map, a seductive object that provided a tactile basis for discussing itineraries, locations, and routes through the city. A 'modern' version of this map was our second assignment. Using the same process, the same pairs of students produced a similarly-scaled tactile map by tracing structures in Google Earth; we used the two maps to discuss changes in built form, transportation, and open space that the city has undergone in the 250 years between the two maps.

Just prior to departure, we disassembled the map into its constituent 6cm x 120cm strips. Students traveled with these, and on arrival in Rome we re-assembled the maps and assigned the project's second phase.

### TRANSECT STUDY

Upon our arrival in Rome, we asked students to conduct a full 'transect study' of their designated map segment. The 'transect,' we explained, came from botanical studies, during which scientists literally walk a straight line of up to 50 miles, taking samples as they go, to establish statistical species counts. Given the unfamiliarity of Rome to virtually all of our students, the notion of a programmed walk through an entirely new environment seemed appropriate. We assigned each pair to walk their strip from south to north (a walk of about 5 kilometers), staying within their boundaries (approximately 150 meters) wherever possible, and 'sampling' or recording some form of their urban experience using drawings, photographs, found objects,

etc. Valid recordings could include things of physical, temporal, historical, or metaphorical interest, and we suggested that students take samples at regular intervals in addition to finding obviously 'interesting' things, emphasizing the quotidian along with the monumental. We suggested, as well, that they pay attention to moments where the Nolli and Google Earth maps coincided, and where they diverged; we recommended that at some point, they attempt to navigate using only their Nolli strips.



Figure 2. Google Earth map with student itineraries

In many cases, students had to transgress their sector boundaries. The physical structure of the city often made travel within these difficult or impossible (or, in some cases, expensive). But even where students could choose a reasonable path, their routes were often unlikely, starting and finishing in neighborhoods well off the normal tourist itinerary and often involving winding routes through back streets, alleys, neighborhood parks, and artifacts such as rail and subway stations. These, we pointed out, were opportunities, and students responded with documentation of what made their routes particularly challenging, enlightening, or just plain strange.

The walks were scheduled over a 48-hour period. Students walked their entire route the first day, and faculty organized 'desk crits' in the field that met up with groups at pre-assigned places and times. While students walked paths more or less south to north, faculty inevitably traversed a (longer) route diagonally through the city, with fleeting moments

of meeting and missing that emphasized the temporal layering of the city's daily life (in the end, we had only one missed appointment, which all concerned found rather incredible). We allowed them to retrace their steps on the second day, to visit sites or moments that had become more interesting or important only with the recollection of the full day's walk beforehand. Students recorded their routes, later tracing these through both Illustrator and on the wood Nolli etching itself; these formed the 'score' for the performance of walking, meeting, and sampling that had occurred on the first day.

### ITINERARY MAPS

Back in studio, we asked students to take their recordings, their route, and their recollections and create a physical "experiential map" that unpacked the lived experience of their calculated, artificially delimited routes. We encouraged them to use samples, sketches, photographs, and recordings that they had taken on site, and to find a formal and experiential method of reconstructing this in miniature. The resulting constructions had to fit within the dimensions of the original wooden strips, with a z-dimension chosen arbitrarily of one roman foot. When reassembled, the itinerary maps formed an "exquisite corpse" whose disconnects and radically different approaches contrasted with the overall order and patterns of the two wooden maps; the three together, we argued, constituted a layering in time, geography, and experience that could form the basis for their subsequent explorations in Rome.

Four student "itinerary maps" are detailed, following:

#### Segment 10 - Processional Walk by Jennifer Whitney and Blake Fisher

What does it mean? Our itinerary! We understood the assignment as a ceremonial descent on Rome, a 72-hour canvas of the city. In an attempt to literally record and convey their itinerary as an act of procession rather than ceremony, we deliberately wandered in and out of their segment while traversing its entire length. By walking with tape recorder in hand we created an audio compilation of their itinerary; a record of the ephemeral nature of people and places that joined and then left their processional walk.

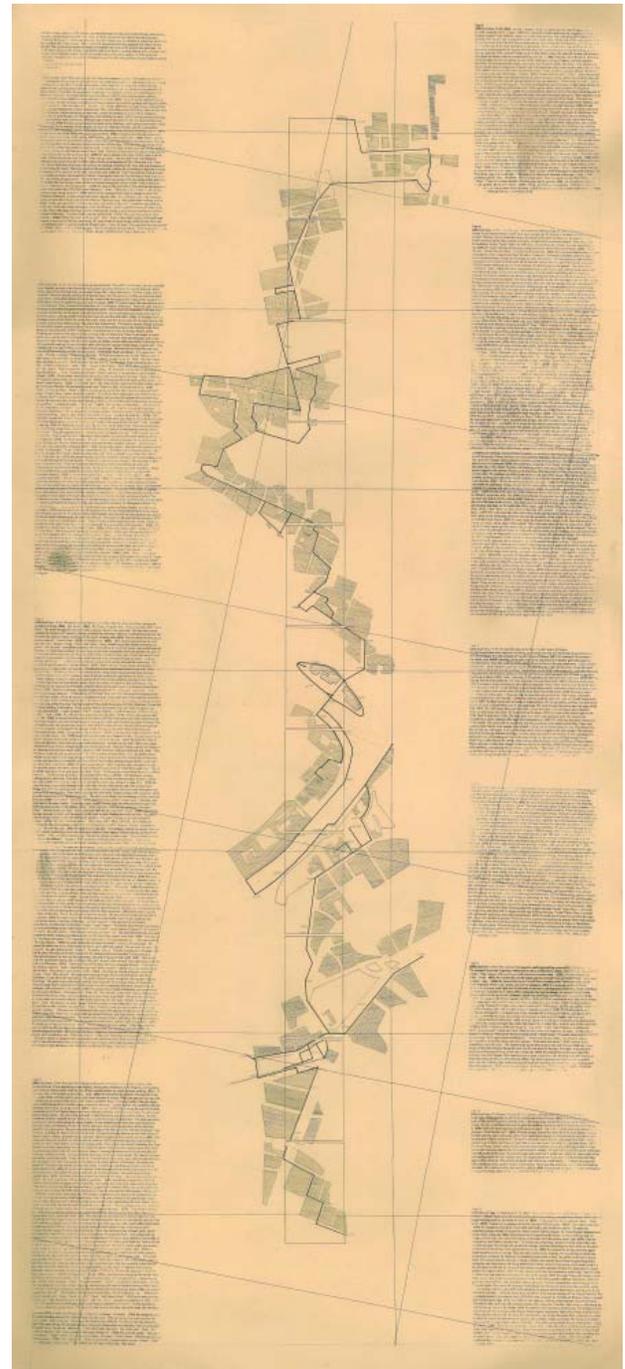


Figure 3. "Processional Walk" by Jenni Whitney and Blake Fisher

Based on this inquiry, we then produced a drawing that represents our processional path with adjacent buildings and a written transcript of the discussion we had along the way. Numerical notations based on the tape recorder's counter allow the reader to



Figure 4. "Republic of Transect" by Andrew Temeyer and Emily Wulf.

excerpt this processional experience. A container for these tapes was then constructed of three wooden orange crates found along our itinerary.

#### **Segment 12 - The Republic of Transect by Andrew Temeyer and Emily Wulf**

Our strip runs through the center and down the spine of the historical city circa 1748, from Piazza del Popolo down via del Corso, through Piazza Venezia and then through a series of 19th- and 20th century residential neighborhoods. Each time we stopped to take a "sample" as per our instructions, we found ourselves in a new context. According to our "samples," one zone was dominated by a hospital and pharmacies, another by governmental buildings, another by a crush of bars and restaurants, and so on. In fact, there were so many different building and program types packed into this small strip that it seemed to us to be a city in and of itself. Inspired by Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, we sifted these programs and created an orderly new "republic" with 11 zones defined by activities: Public, Service, Government, Education, Religious, Cultural Preservation, Entertainment, Doughnut-Residential, Doughnut-Hole Residential, Stacked Doughnut-Hole Residential, and International Relations. Both analysis and absurdity are at play in the design of the new Republic.

#### **Segment 23 - The Then and Now by Sarah Burnett and Jenna Thompson**

Our study of a narrow strip of Rome led to discovering and uncovering the "then" and "now" of what, at first glance, seemed only another part

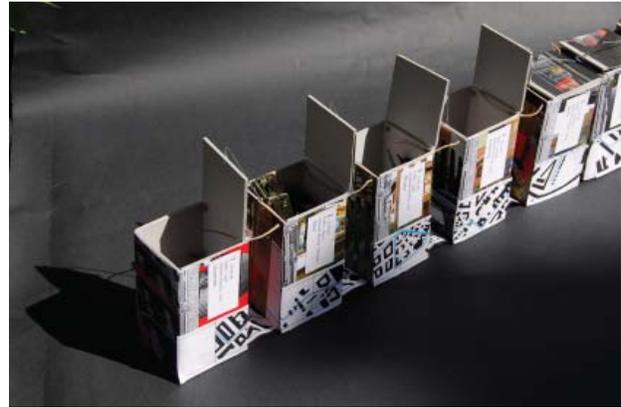


Figure 5. "Time Capsule" by Jeremy Perreault and John Wachtel.

of the living city. Street markets and cappuccinos with chocolate powered hearts on via Capponi, a Chinese restaurant, a university, a hospital which looked more like a resort, a park with paths named for victims of the mafia.

Inspired by the state of the present we set out to discover how it evolved. The more we researched the area the more we began to see the strip as an important atypical slice of Rome. Varying forces including the Papacy, the Fascist government, and WWII, shaped Rome's Segment No. 23 of today. The impact of politics and religion on the section is tangible. Every block unfolded a new event in history and it was clear that what happened in the past dictated what is there presently. To walk it now is only to skim the surface, the facades. The post-1945 buildings hide the damage that was previously done.

Our research accumulated and finally we understood that there really is no typical area of Rome. A street name here is linked to a place there, which resulted in a dark historical event on the outskirts. Places in Rome are by people, events and happenings.

#### **Segment 24 – Time Capsule by Jeremy Perreault and John Wachtel**

We approached this project as openly as possible. Prior to walking our section we decided not to limit ourselves in the types of observations we would make. At each of the 12 designated stops we photographed as much as possible, took notes, and collected an artifact that seemed (at the time) to best represent the region.

Reviewing the information we collected revealed that our stretch of Rome contained at least 12 distinct districts, with no obvious transitions between them. To represent this urban condition in our project we decided to visualize each location as a discrete box loosely connected with strings and wire to the consecutive box [7]. The connections enable the project to be partially collapsed, allowing the boxes to be either opened or closed. Each box is covered with a photo collage, condensed field notes, and contains the artifact found at the site. Only when the project is in its “opened” state, can all of the information be fully understood.

### ASSESSMENT

We were encouraged, and indeed surprised, by the range and depth of responses, and by the students’ tales of discovering while on their itineraries. Some approached the sampling process literally—one group of students bottled water samples from sources such as fountains, the Tiber, or cafes—while others adopted more abstract approaches. The final result was certainly a strange map, which we assembled over the course of an afternoon as students described and recalled their journeys. We drew parallels to the Situationists, discussing the concept of the *derive* and noting, as one student suggested, that the entire notion of a structured *derive* was, to say the least, perverse. But that discussion captured the unintentional success of the project, in that the dialogue between lines on a map and experience on the ground is fundamentally one between the intellectualization of space and its lived experience; by focusing so intently on the graphic nature of the Nolli Map and then being plunged into the realities of the City, the overwhelming density of urban experience was something our students clearly recognized as being absent from representations.

Other conceptual realizations that flowed from our discussion included the layering of history; several students noticed that paths on the Nolli map that seemed either possible or exalted no longer existed. Monuments in several cases presented barriers in the form of steep admission charges, and the question of what remained ‘public’ versus what was offered to tourists formed the basis for continued discussion throughout the semester. We also noted the intransigence of the Tiber in both promoting and frustrating routes through the City, and the

single element that each strip had in common: an intersection or traverse along the old city walls. In many cases these defined routes, forcing students onto adjacent sectors, but in other cases students were presented with modifications in the form of automobile gates that reduced the walls’ presence in the daily reality of the city considerably.

Our efforts were not purely academic, however, and we were encouraged to see, as well, that the Nolli Walk also introduced students to the city as a navigable reality. By asking students to begin on the southern edge of the map, we made their first forays into Rome challenging, difficult trips that involved heavy use of public transit, walks through neighborhoods at or beyond the periphery of the *centro*, and that were in several cases frustrated by rail lines, highways, or fences. While the temptation in Rome is to remain focused on the historic center, this immediate introduction to areas outside the walls gave students from the start of the semester an understanding of the contemporary city and its often complete detachment from the usual tourist itineraries. Students were left with much broader knowledge of how to get around, and their projects later in the semester reflected both a confidence in navigating the more distant areas of the city and an interest in seeking these areas out—more than one described wanting to study something *fuori le mura*, or “outside the walls,” and later analysis projects included Roma (“gypsy”) communities<sup>1</sup>, family practices<sup>2</sup>, various edge conditions<sup>3</sup> and buildings in distant neighborhoods<sup>4</sup>.

We were left with three distinct sets of artifacts ourselves: the wooden maps, the itinerary maps in digital and built form, and our own transects, which expanded and challenged our own understanding of a city that each of us had been familiar with already. In using the technique of dividing the city into abstract strips, and exploring it as a structured transect, the city was ‘made strange,’ and demanded decoding and re-understanding on our part, as well as the students’.

### CONCLUSIONS

Study Abroad programs often face their most awkward, difficult moments during the initial phase of cultural adjustment, where students who may never have been out of the country are suddenly confronted with new terrain, new environments,

new language, and new social norms. There is, inevitably, a temptation to withdraw and to seek out the familiar and comfortable. The Nolli Map served a number of functions, but we suspect its most important may well have been to provide students a structured (albeit strangely structured) excuse to engage the city right away, and to seek out and explore some of its more challenging districts. We continue to debate and argue of the project's real significance—was it a *derive*, do the experiential projects constitute a 'map' themselves, to what extent do the obsessively recorded lines of the project represent an urban entity—but we recognize that its greatest function may well have been as a simple introduction to the city that set our subsequent semester up well for bold, far-flung explorations of Rome beyond the *centro*.

## ENDNOTES

### 1. "ROma" by Karen Bermann

This studio worked in collaboration with an Italian organization, Laboratorio Architettura Nomade, and a Roma rights organization, UNIRSI, to document living conditions in 3 Roma ("gypsy") communities. This was part of a larger documentation project, EU-ROma MApping, undertaken in four European countries. The work introduced students to other parts of Rome, and indeed to other Romes. ([www.monachina-rome.com](http://www.monachina-rome.com), [www.castelromano-rome.com](http://www.castelromano-rome.com), [www.kalderasha-rome.com](http://www.kalderasha-rome.com))

### 2. "Drawing Culture" by Peter P. Goché

Our engagement of constructed environments within a particular material culture is affected by the physical items associated with defining its setting. In an effort to narrow this experiential field of study, this course of study assessed the Italian mealtime situation as informed by student inquiries while studying in Rome, Italy. Each student was asked to conduct anthropological fieldwork and from this effort produce a set of jottings or field notes that would then inform the production of a single ornamental drawing.

### 3. "Edge(y) Conditions: Water and Urban Space" by Christoph Kling

This studio worked across three sites, each following artificial or natural watercourses. Aqueduct Park in the south-east of Rome, The Acqua Paula aqueduct and its displays on the Janiculum Hill and the Tiber's embankment around the Tiber Island. A brief study of how watersystems have affected the development of Rome started the two week charrettes, each focussed on a one of these sites with different historical emphasis - ancient roman, renaissance, early modern, while containing layers of all before mentioned periods. Each site represented lost opportunities: The presence of WATER and the absence of PUBLIC Space or Public ENGAGEMENT with this important element. The students physical site exploration, research and design process was aimed at creating an intervention that would allow

the public to engage and experience the waters of Rome. Design proposals had to reinforce the relationship between the disjoint elements within each site - city and river, aqueduct and street, park and aqueduct, fountain and piazza.

### 4. "Perfect Works of Architecture" by Tom Leslie

"Perfect Works of Architecture" asked students to find, live with, record, and draw a structure in Rome that touched on the difficult relationship between things as they are conceived and things as they are manifested. Based on their walks through Rome, each student presented, at the start of the charrette, a structure that embodied some sort of mathematical harmony. For one week, they were asked to spend as much time as physically possible immersed in and/or around the structure, recording and sketching it obsessively, noting where this harmony was emphasized or contradicted by the structure's material reality. For the second week, they drew from their notes in studio, producing traditional hand drawings in ink, pencil, charcoal, or watercolor that transmitted their findings and explored the gap between things as we conceive them, and things as they are realized.