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The Expressions of Political Power in Panoramic and Grand Space in Ancient Roman Empire before A.D. 476 ¹

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ABSTRACT: *This article argues the occupation, penetration and radiation of political power in the panoramic space by explaining the typical public architecture and public space in the former Roman Empire. As the most important public space, squares are the places where emperors show their powers. So the political elites try to occupy it. In Colosseum the emperors' supreme power is thoroughly and incisively expressed by the carefully designed space settings. The public baths with compound decorations and functions are the visual panoramic scene. In this entertaining public space political power penetrates the individual life. The grandness of public architectures in roman city are the result of powers' ostentation. With the imperial structure the styles and functions of public architectures in roman city radiates the whole empire. With these three relations between power and space this article draws two conclusions. First the ostentatious power based on the competitive power system is the connector between the republic and early empire. The great achievements in public architecture are the fruits of it. Second the super grand territory is the result of the links between military and politics. This links lead to the competitive power system. It also explains why the roman empire is invaded by the barbarians in the west but it continues in the east.*

KEY WORDS: roman empire, panoramic space, colosseum, Roman city

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INTRODUCTION

In the European political development, Roman republic can be described as a ‘crown’ because of its sophisticated institutions of checks and balances. The brilliance is reflected into the modern world. But as a huge political entity covering Europe, Asia and Africa, Roman got its peak in the empire. From republic to empire, Roman endured political centralization, that was the military leaders’ grasping powers as much as possible. The games and conflicts among these leaders are the main topic of historical writing. But this article tries to use a new way, that is space analysis, and take the public architectures and Roman city as subjects to explore the expression of political power in the grand and panoramic space, articulate the influence of republican tradition to the empire and fate of empire.

Part One: The Reconstruction of the Forum and Campus by Caesar’s Family: the Fading of Republican Space

Space was an important dimension to check the power in political institution in republican era. The powers of the consul and tribune were effective in Roman city and one mile outside of the city. The triumph military leaders with the troops couldn’t go beyond the Rubicon River. These measures aimed to avoid a super powerful power without limits in space. But in 49 B.C. Caesar headed his troops trespassing the river, which obviously destroyed the republican institution.

The most important public space in republican era were Forum Romanum and Campus Martius, where the Roman people held the meetings. The highest power lied in these meetings and assemblies. They were composed of comitia centuriata, comitia tributa and concilium plebis. Comitia centuriata was held on Campus Martius outside of the pomerium. The other two were held on the Forum Romanum inside the pomerium. In early times the way to make decision was to acclaim then ballot. Geoffrey S. Summi ever described the scenery by imagination: ‘At a typical election, the Roman people gathered in the Campus Martius and crowded, tribe by tribe or century by century, into the saepta, or ovile, to elect magistrates. The metaphor inherent in ovile is apt: the Roman electorates was herded into an enclosure where in early times they elected magistrates by acclamation, later by secret ballot, with all the tribes or centuries casting their votes simultaneously.’² In early republican times the saepta was a temporary building. After the assembly it was destroyed. Inside the city, the ballot spot was Temple of Castor (see j in map1), which was at the corner of Forum Romanum.

² Geoffrey S. Summi, *Ceremony and Power: Performing Politics in Rome between Republic and Empire*. Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2005, p.22.

In republican time, Forum Romanum was the most important public place inside the city. Temple of Castor and Curia Hostilia (see c in map1) were in diagonal direction. The foundation of the Curia was reached out and curved, forming a stage, called Rostra (see a in map1). The inside area of the curved stage was for the assembly. The stage was not only for the elite to have a speech, but also for the citizens who had finished voting to stand on, which was a demonstration as well as a supervision. Since the Rostra was in a relatively higher point it served as the highlight and focus spot.

Saepta, Temple of Castor, Curia and Rostra were the symbols of republican political powers. Their locations were kept till the Caesar's time. When Caesar came into power, he decided to establish a permanent Saepta as the hallmark of republic. In 26B.C. Saepta Iulia was built. This was an enclosure building with 310m in length and 120m in width with delicate stoas. But later, August and his successors used it as market and game space. In 80A.D., it was destroyed by fire. The reconstructed Saepta again ruined in the fire in 110A.D.. Hadrian rebuilt it.

Saepta Iulia was the biggest building with cover in republican time. Its importance can be deduced by its size. But in the early empire time, its function was multiple. In fact, Caesar had controlled almost half of official appointments. So the voting and the assembly were much less. Then Saepta became a memento and republic a reminiscent. But its later reconstructions reveals that it tones the space politics: open to the public. Though the power struggles among the elites were in the dark side there is daylight compete. The ostentatiousness of the power is based on this publicity, which will be discussed in later part of this article.

Saepta Iulia precluded the declining of republic. At the same time the change about the Curia and Temple of Castor corresponded the decline. In 29B.C. Octavius began to use the new curia, called Julian Senate or Curia Julia(see p in the map below) because the old one was destroyed in a riot in 52B.C.. The rebuild plan was made by Caesar. After it was constructed Octavius settled the status of Victory inside to memorize his triumph. The two curias were close to each other but has difference orientation. Also in 29B.C. the Temple of Divus Iulius(see k in the map) was built on the spot where Caesar was cremated. In 9B.C. this temple had been the voting space. The former voting spot Temple of Castor got fire in 14B.C.. Even though it was rebuilt the voting place was shifted to the Temple of Divus Iulius. The two temples were close.

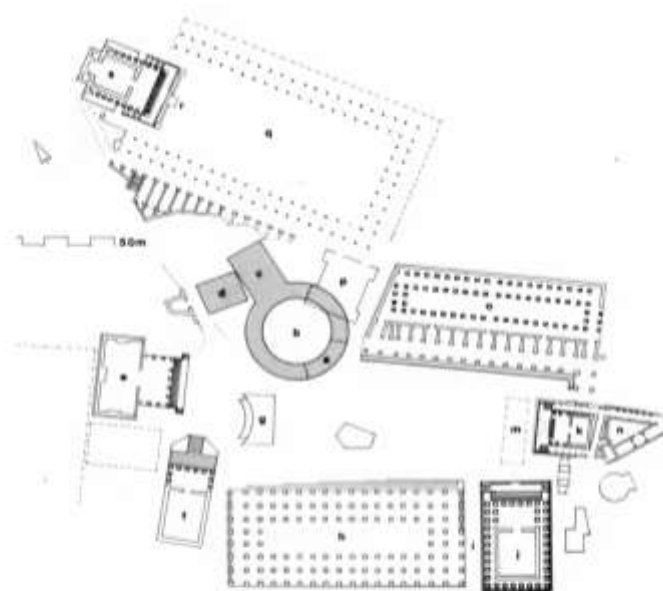


Figure 2. The Forum Romanum and Forum Julium (Ulrich 1993: 52, fig. 1).

a) Republican Rostrum; b) Republican Comitium; c) Curia Hostilia; e) Temple of Concordia; g) Imperial Rostrum; h) Basilica Julia; i) Vicus Tuscus; j) Temple of Castor; k) Temple of Divus Iulius; o) Basilica Aemilia; p) Curia Julia. Reproduced with the permission of R. B. Ulrich and the *American Journal of Archaeology*.

From Darryl A. Phillips: The Temple of Divus Iulius and the Restoration of Legislative Assemblies under Augustus, *Phoenix*, Fall-Winter/automne-hiver 2011, Vol.65, No. 3/4 pp.371-388

The subtle changes in the positions of the curias and temples were a minor side of republican disintegration. As early as 44B.C. Caesar separated the Rostra from the Curia and moved it to the west side of the forum, facing the open space. ‘The removal of the Rostra out from under the shadow of the Curia marked a significant break with Republican tradition, for whoever stood on Caesar’s new Rostra no longer had the Curia as a backdrop and perhaps would appear less beholden to the senatorial aristocracy.’³

Thus the Rostra, ballot spot and Curia were all in the new place and had new orientation. These changes enlarged the space and formed a new power axis. Compared with the republican axis---from northwest to southeast, the new one was from west to east. The

³ Geoffrey S. Summi, *Ceremony and Power: Performing Politics in Rome between Republic and Empire*. P.50.

Curia was away from the axis which meant its declining at the end of the republic. The Forum Romanum was 'to be treated like a national shrine, lovingly restored at great expense, but no longer the focus of political life'.⁴

What's more, the Seapta, Curia and the temple to ballot were all named after the Caesar's family name. This method was to memorize Caesar's great achievements as well as erase the republican connotation. As the commonwealth of roman people Republic is anonymous. 'SPQR' should be its name.

Part Two: Forum Romanum and Empire Forums: Occupying the Space

The history of Forum Romanum can be traced to regia era. At that time Vesta including the temple and living spaces were the main buildings on the forum. In republican period the Curia and temples were built. The forum was a place for assembly, debate and jurisdiction. Later on the Basilicas became the boundary of the forum. As the decisive leader of the republican Cicero emphasized the forum was belonged to plebian. He said Forum Romanum was forum populi Romani---the Forum of the Roman People. Though Caesar built new temples and Octavius set up Triumph Arch the outline of the Forum Romanum was kept intact.

Not only a public space to participation, Forum Romanum was also a space to memorize. In early republican time nobles as well as ordinary citizens could set their shrine and built status on the forum. So the forum became crowded and massy. In 158B.C. the censor moved away most of the status. The status which had been permitted by the Senate and assembly were kept.⁵

Compared with the Forum Romanum as the symbol of plebian, the Caesar Forum, August Forum, Vespasian Forum and Traiana Forum which were later built in the north revealed the emperors' ambition to eternalize their fame and glory. On these forums there were emperors' shrine, triumph arch and stoas with fine decorations. These carefully designed scenery revealed that public space could be used as media and resources to show and strengthen the political power.⁶

These forums were the stages for political rituals as well as the daily-used public space with many functions. Porticoes and exedraes in stoas were used as courts. All kinds of

⁴ Geoffrey S. Summi, *Ceremony and Power: Performing Politics in Rome between Republic and Empire*. P.56.

⁵ Amy Russell, *The Politics of Public Space in Republican Rome*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p.58.

⁶ With modern technology Gilbert J. Gorski, James E. Packer in the *The Roman Forum: a Reconstruction and Architectural Guide* (Cambridge University Press, 2015., Part III) restored the beautiful sceneries of these forums.

speeches could be delivered. The courts was free to come and leave. Sometimes it was separated by a curtain. The gossip was encouraged. 'It engendered a belief---'closeness to the people ' of both power and the courts. The emperor himself presided over the courts in full public view for hours at a time. We must imagine these spaces filled with both small and large groups of visitors: those hurrying to keep an appointment, others looking for an acquaintance, and still others idly standing by, observing.'⁷

What's more, from the landscape of the forums these political connotations can be deduced. First. The emperors opened up new spaces to build the forum instead of covering the Forum Romanum or renaming it. So the Forum Romanum as a piece embedded in the empire forums. Second. The emperors didn't cover the predecessors' forum. So the older forums and the current emperor's forum formed a mosaic, which coexisted in one space and time. This coexistence can be explained as competitive, underneath of which lies in the rival of big families.

Part Three: The Panoramic View: Penetration of Power to the Space

Ludi, that was public entertainments, was a main part of roman public life, including watching opera, chariot racing, game even killing the criminals. In republican time the facilities of these activities were demolished when the ludi was over. There are two reasons to explain this. First romans believed that entertainment were temporary. Moral self-discipline forced them. Second the congregation of the mass was in danger of riot.

In 71A.D. , Vespasian decided to construct a permanent building for public entertainment by using his own funds. Wasn't he worry about the mass riot? The reason lies this. The former emperor Nero was hated by the roman people. His luxury Domus Aurea testified his insatiable greed. Vespasian aimed to make a contrast. One for public one for private. Compared with the potential riot, the support and favor from the mass were more important. Vespasian himself looked more generous and benevolent. Additionally Vespasian's action just followed the roman principle to punish the evils--'domnatio memoriae'.

After 10 years building Colosseum was completed. It was the largest architecture in ancient roman. The oval shape covered 187m in length and 155m in width. The performing area was 86m in length and 54m in width. This amphitheater had 60 lines from ground to top and was divided to 5 areas. The first area, that was closest to the performing area, was for the most prestigious persons such as emperor, senators and

⁷ Bjorn C. Ewald and Carlos F. Norena ed., *The Emperor and Rome: Space, Representation and Ritual*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010, pp.50-52.

priest. The second area was for the nobles. The third was for the rich. The fourth was for the common people. The fifth, the most far area was for the humble women. It could hold 80,000 persons. Besides gladiatorial game, executing criminals and dramas were performed here. The inside space of the Colosseum fabricated the panoramic view, which greatly helped the emperor's power to deliver to everyone in the Colosseum.

First. The areas of the seats were corresponded to the social status so all the roman society were included. What's more the area was carefully designed. Every class used its own path to the seat. The paths were not shared or crossed. In a word the inclusiveness and separation made all the society present. It was on this condition the panoramic power came out.

Second. From the view of space-body position, the audience whether the emperor or the servant were visible to each other. In this situation emperor was not only acted as an amiable father who shared the joyful moments with his subordinates but also made a split-second decision to free or kill a gladiator. The emperor's supreme power was expressed in a 'seeing is believing' way. Compared with this, the Chinese emperors used the other strategy. They hid themselves in the forbidden city to make the power mysterious.

To be further, in a theoretical and pure scientific view, the panoramic view made everyone visible. They had equal chance to be seen. But the emperor's position was deliberately in privilege because of his supreme power. So as a specific arena Colosseum created the panoramic power which was fostered by the panoramic view. In a word, the panoramic view helped the emperor's power to be visible and in a privileged position. The power and the view mutually strengthen each other.

Part Four: The Compound Decorations and Functions: Penetration of Power to Body

As the detailed parts of the architecture, decorations are the most expressive. In the end of republican era, when concerning the decorations, Cicero ever said, roman people hated the personal luxury but they liked public magnificent. The moral comments about the delicate things lied in its function: for individual life it was luxuria, for public use it was magnificentia.⁸ So the public architectures were elegant and exquisite. A good case in point was the columns of Colosseum with Athens classic three styles: Doric, Corinth and Ionia and roman arches.

⁸ Amy Russell, *The Politics of Public Space in Republican Rome*, p.9.

How did these compound decorations express the empire power? In view of observer, these decorations with compound styles could be seen at a glance. As the grand and best architecture the temples and Colosseum were sure to combine all the aesthetic elements in view of romans' magnificent. The complexity of these aesthetic elements was connected with different cultures and specialty in gigantic roman. In the view of sense, the marbles with different colors were used in a building. Since these marbles were from different parts of empire every color was a mark of a certain area. The combination of these marbles naturally evoked the grandeur of the empire. In the view of psychology, these public buildings were the symbol of political power. This complexity indicated its inclusiveness. This inclusiveness even can be transferred to the acceptance with centralization of power.

This complexity also can be found in the functions of Thermae. The public empire thermaes were multi-functional, including bath, gym space, lecture hall and library. This thermae with compound functions were the standard form in the time of early empire. It was built all over the empire. As a public welfare the common citizens could spend most of their daytimes there. So political power's indirect manipulation occurred.

In these thermaes the body and mind of the common citizen were all well served. Paul Zanker believes that this indicates the classical 'Paideia' tradition was revived by the emperor. It was emperors' duty to educate the citizen by all kinds of ways. ⁹Anne Hrychuk Kontokosta thinks that the thermae with huge size and multi-functions was from the republican private balnea and hoti. ¹⁰ Both of the ideas are reasonable. Whether the 'Paideia' tradition or the spread and enlargement of private bath, it is sure that thermae as an invisible power penetrates common persons' body and soul. In modern literature Michel Foucault's explanation about discipling and punishment talked the same routine. On the other hand the emperor as a giver tried to provide the ease and joy. This is an influence and power in disguise. And to be vital, it is penetrating and unconscious.

Part Five: Roman City against the Background of Empire: the Radiation of Ostentatious Power

By the end of 1st century, the public architectures in roman city were numerous and fine. The peak of architecture was in the reign of Trajan and Hadrian. These achievements

⁹ Paul Zanker, 'By the emperor, for the people--- 'Popular' architecture in Rome', in Bjorn C. Ewald and Carlos F. Norena ed., *The Emperor and Rome: Space, Representation and Ritual*, Cambridge University Press, 2010. p.63.

¹⁰ Anne Hrychuk Kontokosta, 'Building the Thermae Agrippae: Private Life, Public Space and Politics of Bathing in Early Imperial Rome', in *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol.123, No.1(January 2019),pp.45-77.

were the products of emperors successive inputs. The ancient roman historian Suetonius ever recorded every emperor's achievements in urban buildings from Caesar to Domitian. The other elites were required to make contribution to public buildings. The reasons why they spared no effort to construct the public building lies in two sides. First they wanted to obtain the popular favors. Second they aimed to exclusively occupy the space, mark it and make it the symbol of personal power. All these were to show their power to the potential opponents. This was the ostentatious power based on the competition.

Actually this ostentatious power originated from republic. In republic the grand and exquisite public architectures were the commonwealth of the roman people. This idea was still believed in empire. So the emperor just followed the republican tradition about public building. Additionally, in republican time the triumph leaders always decorated their city with loots. Cicero ever said, when the elites took their offices roman people would expect to be treated by dinner or other entertainments. So both in republic and early empire this ostentatious power grew out from the fundamental institutions.

The public buildings in roman city made it glory in the history of architecture. To be further how did these buildings in roman city effect the whole empire? Besides the symbolic and memorized architectures, the urban facilities and management in roman city were very good. One of the reasons could be found in the Ten Books on Architecture written by Vitruvius. It was more important that he submitted the book to Augustus. Later Augustus adapted the city planning principle to divide the city into 14 areas and administrated them.¹¹

As the capital, roman city had good urban infrastructures and administration. It worked as model to be copied by the other cities. Trajan ever permitted to build the grand infrastructures and architectures all over the roman, such as bridges, roads, aqueducts and symbolic buildings. Besides the emperor's determination, some other elements in practice connected roman city with other part of empire and made the city to be 'radiative'.

First the roads and aqueducts tightly connected with the daily life in roman city. These physical ties brought fresh water and goods to roman city. On the other hand, the city as a consuming body, stimulated the economy.

¹¹ As for the urban building by Augustus, see Werner Eck, *The Age of August*, Deborah Lucas Schneider trans, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, pp.105-112.

Second with the military conquer the image of roman city was 'copy and paste' to new lands.¹² So by the deliberate way the roman city lighted the remote area.

Third the grand and exquisite buildings was not only visible but also opened to the public, including foreigners. The price of thermae was affordable. So the visitors to roman city could sense the greatness of roman by their direct feeling.

It needs to be mentioned that the radiation of the roman city is on the condition that roman empire was vast in land and diverse in cultures. Fresh waters and unique local products were in the empire. To be further the roman as a consuming city it needed the supplies also circulated the funds, talented persons and goods.

CONCLUSION

Occupation, penetration and radiation are the ways that political power in early roman empire used to express itself. The former two are in micro level. The last is in the macro empire level. Occupation explains the elites' competition. Penetration explains the unconscious control of power toward the space and body. The winner in the occupation can manipulate the penetration. But how does the micro connect with macro? The answer lies in the romans' admiration about military honor and the relation between the military and politics. Romans believe that triumph in the war is not only the way get wealth but also a way to become the political elites. Actually in roman empire the central government was rather loose. The decisions were made by the discussion and negotiation with elites such as senators and high officials. These political elites and family had their own lands in local areas where they conquered.

The so-called empire was competitive inside. This is the continuation of the republic. How did this pattern form? First roman admired the triumph in military conquer. The triumph was the precondition to get the political power. The uncertainty and complexity in the war made the results unpredictable. So the military winners sprouted in the fertilized soil. They would be the potential competitor in the political power. Second the relation between the military and politics were the reason for the vast land of roman. The winners tried to manage their own land and built the local city taking roman city as a model. So when the roman city was invaded by the German soldiers it seemed that the roman city was no longer as glory and illuminating as before. But the local cities still worked and kept the empire in the east.

¹² As for the details, see Richard Sennet, *Flesh and Stone: the Body and City in the Western Civilization*, Chapter three, W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.

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