

Next Generation EU The Case of Rome, two strategic actions within a list of projects

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Abstract

This paper examines the implementation of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) in Rome, with a particular focus on its urban dimension. It analyses how city governance, through the creation of a dedicated department and a Special Council Commission, has responded to structural deficiencies by strategically integrating extraordinary resources with long-term urban planning goals. Special attention is given to the Integrated Urban Programs (PUI) of Corviale, Tor Bella Monaca, and Santa Maria della Pietà, highlighting their transformative potential as nodes of innovation and inclusion. The case of Rome exemplifies a shift from top-down emergency planning to territorially grounded governance strategies.

Keywords: Urban regeneration; PNRR; Rome; Integrated Urban Programs (PUI); Living Labs; Urban governance

1. Introduction

In recent years, cities have emerged as crucial actors in responding to major global transitions – from climate adaptation to social resilience and digital innovation. However, this urban protagonism has often clashed with the rigidity of national frameworks and the inertia of institutional systems. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this tension, exposing not only the fragilities of public infrastructure and governance but also the untapped capacity of cities to act as laboratories of policy innovation.

In this context, the European Union launched Next Generation EU, a historic recovery instrument endowed with €750 billion to support Member States in addressing the post-pandemic crisis. The Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), the most extensive national plan in the EU with over €190 billion allocated, represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape public investment, institutional capacity, and territorial development.

Despite its transformative potential, the Italian PNRR has been repeatedly criticised for lacking an overall vision – a “plan without a plan” – with limited coordination, a top-down allocation of resources, and little attention to territorial specificities. Especially in urban areas, this disconnect has often resulted in a mismatch between funding opportunities and actual urban needs.

The city of Rome, Italy's capital and largest metropolis exemplified this contradiction (De Leo, 2022). Initially receiving only two projects within the national strategy – Caput Mundi (focused on tourism) and Cinecittà (media infrastructure) – Rome found itself relegated to a marginal role despite its scale, complexity, and governance challenges.

However, Rome did not remain passive. The change in municipal leadership in late 2021, with the election of Mayor Roberto Gualtieri, marked a decisive turning point. The new administration implemented an ambitious institutional framework to realign the city's strategic vision with the fragmented architecture of the PNRR. It established a dedicated Department for Strategic Planning and PNRR (DPSP) and created a Special City Council Commission (CS PNRR), facilitating interdepartmental coordination and participatory oversight.

This paper examines how Rome utilised the PNRR not only as a financial opportunity but also as a catalyst for strategic urban governance. Through a detailed analysis of the Integrated Urban Programs (PUI), particularly those of Corviale, Tor Bella Monaca, and Santa Maria della Pietà, this study aims to understand how cities can transform emergency funding into long-term urban development.

The aim is twofold: first, to identify the institutional, spatial, and participatory mechanisms that have enabled

Rome to reclaim agency within a nationally constrained framework; second, to reflect on how this experience aligns with the principles of the evolving Urban Agenda for the EU, proposing a path toward institutionalising such practices beyond 2026.

2. The PNRR in Rome: Context, Governance, and Actors

Rome's relationship with national investment programs has historically been complex and ambivalent. As the capital city, Rome is burdened with both symbolic and administrative functions, but it lacks the financial and institutional autonomy typical of European metropolises. The PNRR has made this contradiction even more evident.

Rome's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) was developed in two distinct phases. The first phase, conducted in parallel with national planning, was led by the municipal administration under Mayor Virginia Raggi (Five Star Movement), in office until the end of October 2021. The second phase commenced with the inauguration of the new administration, headed by Mayor Roberto Gualtieri (centre-left), on 3 November 2021, marking the start of the PNRR's operational implementation in the city.

During the initial phase, the City Council focused on drafting a "Resilient and Sustainable Development Plan" (Autumn 2020), incorporating 159 projects proposed by various departments of Roma Capitale. The total value of this plan amounted to €25 billion, intended to be financed through the Recovery Fund. The proposals addressed strategic domains for the city's recovery and growth: social inclusion and urban regeneration, sustainable and integrated mobility, safe and efficient infrastructure, ecological transition, and digital innovation. However, this strategic vision and the projects it comprised were not included in the national PNRR approved by the European Commission in July 2021. In that version, Rome was represented only through two national projects of relevance: Caput Mundi and Cinecittà. Nevertheless, parts of Raggi's proposal, especially those related to the tram lines and the enhancement of the city's archaeological and historical heritage, were later reabsorbed into national programs.

With the arrival of the Gualtieri administration, the launch of the first national funding calls marked a turning point. To successfully participate and secure funding, Roma Capitale signed cooperation agreements with universities in the Lazio region, ensuring a high level of scientific and technical support in the preparation of project proposals. Simultaneously, based on a national agreement between the government and **Invitalia**, the city coordinated its departments to prepare tenders for the design and/or implementation of works (Caudo G., Baioni M., Celata F., De Leo D., Fava, F., Piselli E., Tomasello P. (2024).

A pivotal agreement was also signed with the **Metropolitan City of Rome (CM)** to jointly participate in the call for **Integrated Urban Programs (PUI)**, which allocated €300 million to the CM. This agreement established a collaborative framework between Roma Capitale, the CM, and its municipalities, reserving approximately €200 million for Rome and the remaining funds for other municipalities within the metropolitan area.

In 2022, the majority of the PNRR-related calls were issued, and the city engaged in negotiation procedures with the respective ministries. In June 2022, Mayor Gualtieri, acting as Government Commissioner for the Jubilee, signed an agreement with the Ministry of Tourism (the lead authority for Caput Mundi) to transfer its governance to Roma Capitale. Following this agreement, some of the projects were integrated into the Jubilee framework, while others remained under the direct responsibility of Roma Capitale or were managed by the Ministry of Culture through its Special Superintendency for Rome.

Roma Capitale and the CM participated in nearly all available calls for which they were eligible. In addition, they engaged in "negotiated procedures" with central government entities for strategic, non-competitive projects, such as Caput Mundi, the bicycle lane network, tram and electric bus infrastructure. Some initiatives already financed through other programs (e.g. **PINQuA** — the National Innovative Program for Urban Quality of Living) were also integrated into the implementation framework.

Rome's participation rate in national calls approached 100%, and the city succeeded in securing approximately **90% of the total resources requested**, resulting in an allocation of **€1.15 billion** (excluding additional co-funding from the Ministry for tramways and municipal contributions for PINQuA and cinema/theatre projects). However, one principal exclusion concerned funding for **waste treatment infrastructure** under Mission 2, Component 1, Investment 1.1 (lines A and B), totalling €191.4 million. This rejection was due to selection criteria established by the Ministry for the environment, which prioritised projects in small- and medium-sized cities based on expected impact, thus penalising large metropolitan areas such as Rome.

At the end of the funding acquisition phase, the scope of PNRR investments in Rome had expanded significantly, covering a wide range of strategic sectors (e.g. mobility, digitalisation, culture, and inclusion). From an initial allocation of just under €230 million for Caput Mundi, the city's direct management of resources grew to nearly **€1.2 billion**. Despite several critical issues, the formation phase of Rome's PNRR can, therefore, be regarded as a **successful institutional response** to a challenging national framework.

This paper adopts the perspective of those who view the PNRR not simply as a disbursement mechanism but as an **opportunity to be amplified through the introduction of new tools, methods, and institutional arrangements**. These mechanisms – although shaped by exceptional and complex circumstances – can serve as catalysts for long-term transformation.

While maintaining a critical eye on the structural weaknesses of the PNRR – such as the excessive emphasis on the **quantitative volume of resources** as the dominant evaluative criterion – this contribution argues for a broader and more qualitative understanding of its governance implications. The prevailing narrative has obscured the **absence of strategic planning** and reinforced the impression of a "plan without a plan" (Pizzo, 2022). Furthermore, the national government's interpretation of Rome's role has appeared **anachronistic**, limiting the capital's potential to two symbolic areas – **Cinema and Ancient Rome** – as though the city still belonged to the era of La Dolce Vita. Such a reductive vision fails to grasp the complexity of contemporary Rome and its need for integrated, future-oriented planning.

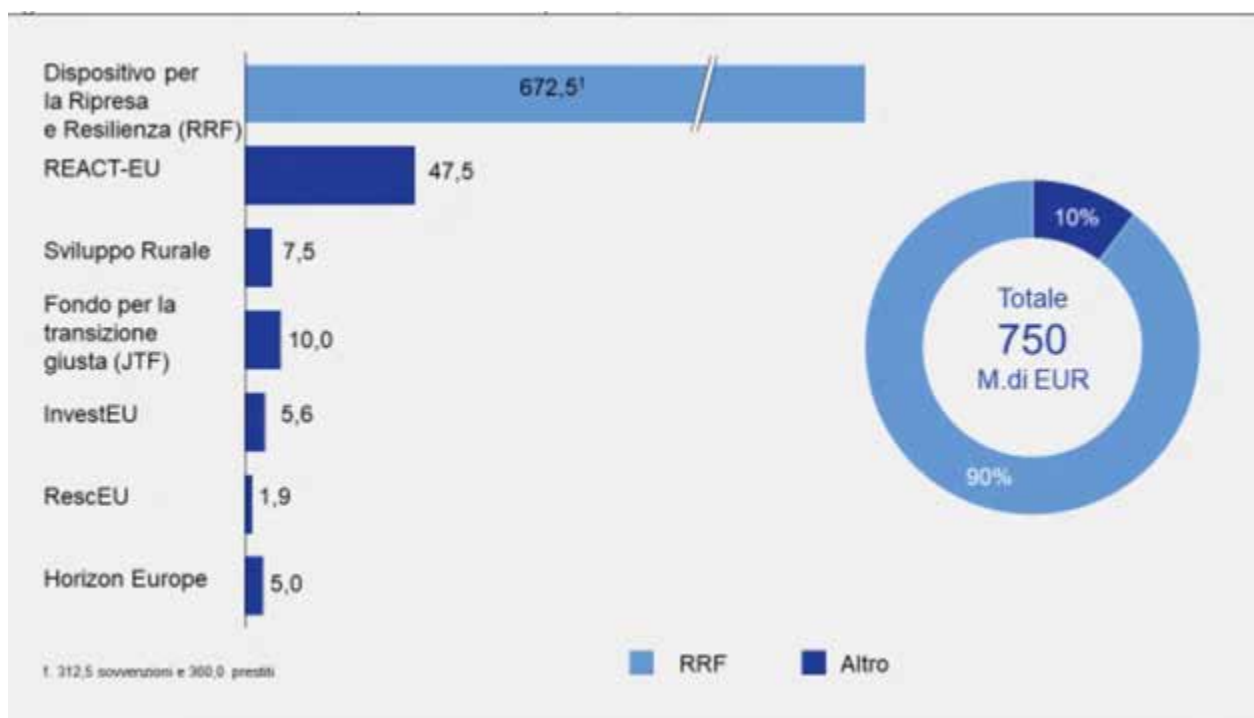


Fig. 1: Next Generation EU – European Commission

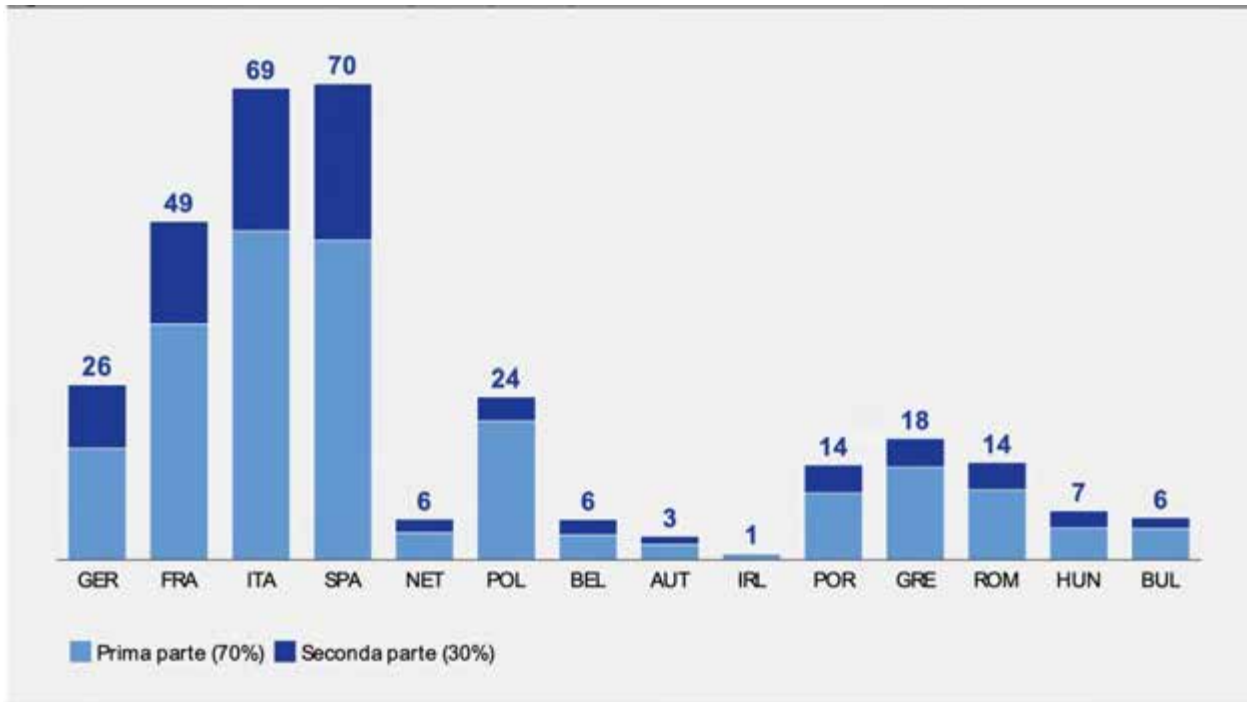


Fig. 2: Next Generation EU – Resource for countries, grants - European Commission

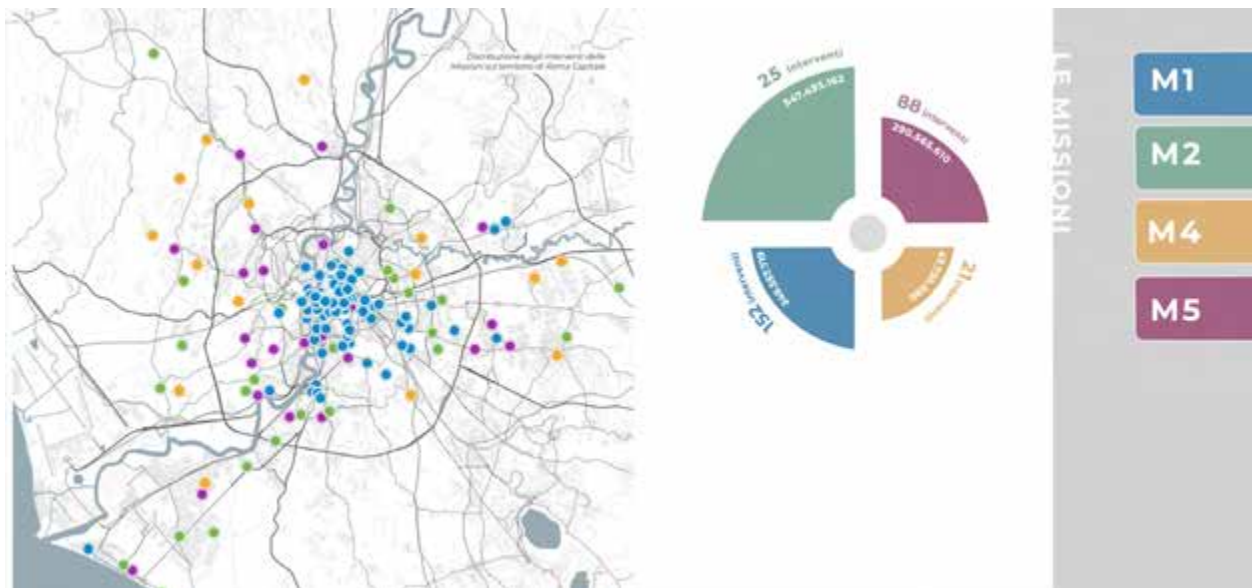


Fig. 3: Rome's NRRP, investments by individual measures and localisation

3. Urban Regeneration Strategies: The Integrated Urban Programs (PUI)

The PUIs, funded under **Mission 5** of the PNRR (Cohesion and Inclusion), represent the most territorially grounded and socially complex component of the plan. In Rome, three priority areas were selected: **Corviale**, **Tor Bella Monaca**, and **Santa Maria della Pietà** – each a symbol of spatial marginality and socio-economic fragmentation. The regeneration model adopted goes beyond physical upgrading. It involves:

- Multi-level coordination (City, Region, ATER, third sector)
- Activation of **30 Civic and Cultural Hubs**
- Integration of **immaterial actions**, such as job activation, education, and care services
- Strong emphasis on **participation and proximity governance**

This integrated approach aims to shift the paradigm from housing-centric redevelopment to **neighbourhood-based regeneration**, embedding welfare, culture, and active citizenship into the very structure of public space.

3.1 Corviale and Tor Bella Monaca, two peripheral icons

Corviale and Tor Bella Monaca are among the most emblematic cases of public housing estates in Rome and, more broadly, in Italy. Both represent the architectural and social outcomes of large-scale, modernist planning in the post-war period. Over time, however, these projects became spatial containers of structural inequality – synonymous with marginalisation, physical decay, and institutional neglect.

However, these same spaces have also become laboratories for resilience, experimentation, and urban innovation. The PNRR's Integrated Urban Programs (PUI) did not impose regeneration from above but built upon years of local action, community work, and territorial knowledge.

3.1.1 Corviale: From Architectural Symbol to Regenerative Ecosystem

Corviale is one of the most iconic urban structures in Italy – a monolithic, one-kilometre-long residential block built between the late 1970s and early 1980s in the southwestern quadrant of Rome. Originally conceived as a “linear city” capable of self-sufficiency, with housing, services, commerce, and leisure integrated within a single continuous structure, Corviale soon fell short of its utopian vision.

Only 80% of the complex was completed, and the entire fourth floor, designed for public and commercial use, remained empty. Over time, this space was informally occupied by families in need of housing, reinforcing the area's stigma. Corviale became a symbol of both architectural excess and public policy failure.

However, since 2014, a new phase began with the launch of the Laboratorio di Città Corviale, coordinated by Roma Capitale, the Lazio Region, ATER (the public housing agency), and multiple academic and social actors. The Laboratorio operates as a place-based institutional infrastructure, combining participatory design, public deliberation, and technical planning.

Thanks to this groundwork, when the PNRR was launched, Corviale was already equipped with a governance platform capable of channelling new investments. The €43 million allocated through the PUI was not a starting point but an accelerator of an ongoing process.

The core objective of the PUI in Corviale is the **completion and functional reactivation of the fourth floor** – the so-called piano libero. This space, once a void and a site of informal appropriation, will be transformed into a **linear public infrastructure** housing:

- Social and cultural services
- Spaces for education and training
- Job creation hubs and co-working areas
- Healthcare and psychological support facilities

The project explicitly adopts the principles of **proximity urbanism**, aiming to restore access to rights and services within walking distance. It is not only a physical intervention but an **institutional reconfiguration** of space – converting a zone of abandonment into a civic backbone.

Parallel to the physical works, a package of “**immaterial**” actions has been activated, encompassing educational support, health services, and employment pathways tailored to the residents' skills and needs. These programs are implemented in cooperation with third-sector organisations selected through public calls.

3.1.2 The Role of the Laboratory

The **Laboratorio di Città Corviale** plays a central role in ensuring the continuity and coherence of the regenera-

tion process. It serves as:

- A **platform for co-design** involving residents, schools, cultural associations, and local businesses
- A **mechanism of coordination** among city departments, ATER, the Lazio Region, and technical offices
- A **monitoring and learning space** where policies are assessed, adapted, and scaled

This multi-actor configuration ensures that regeneration is not only planned “for” Corviale but “with” Corviale. Moreover, the Laboratory maintains a **public presence within the building itself**, operating from offices located inside the complex – a deliberate choice to **reduce institutional distance** and promote trust.



Intervento Trancia H - ante e post-operam.



Intervento Cavea - ante e post-operam.



Intervento Parco Est (rimozione delle barriere visive e accesso al Centro Polivalente Campanella)- ante e post-operam.

Fig. 4 – Corviale’s projects

What emerges in Corviale is more than a redevelopment project. It is a **shift in urban policy** from isolated, short-term interventions to **systemic, cross-sectoral governance** rooted in place. The integration of PNRR resources into a pre-existing strategic trajectory demonstrates how **extraordinary funding can reinforce, rather than distort, local priorities**.

This model challenges traditional notions of urban renewal, which often treat physical upgrading as sufficient. In Corviale, **social infrastructure and public institutions are considered integral components of the regeneration strategy**, not add-ons.

In that sense, Corviale is not only a case study but a **prototype** – offering insights into how European cities can manage complexity through adaptive, participatory, and spatially grounded urban governance (Nevens, F., Frantzeskaki, N., Gorissen, L., & Loorbach, D. (2013).

3.1.3 The Laboratory as a Living Lab: Participatory Urbanism in Practice

The Laboratorio di Città Corviale can be interpreted through the conceptual lens of the **Urban Living Lab (ULL)** – a model of urban experimentation that combines **multi-stakeholder engagement, place-based co-creation, and iterative learning cycles** to address complex challenges in real-life settings (Schliwa & McCormick, 2016; Steen & van Bueren, 2017).

Living Labs are increasingly recognised in urban studies and innovation policy as **arenas for collaborative experimentation**, where public institutions, residents, researchers, and civil society actors engage in the co-production of knowledge, policies, and services. They aim not only to test solutions but to transform institutional relationships and build new capacities for governance.

In this light, the Laboratorio di Città Corviale functions as a **territorially embedded Living Lab** with distinctive characteristics (Nevens et al., 2013; Marvin et al., 2018):

- **Spatial anchoring:** The Laboratory is physically located within the Corviale complex, reducing the symbolic and operational distance between the administration and residents.
- **Actor plurality:** It engages a broad coalition of stakeholders – including Roma Capitale, the Lazio Region, ATER, universities (e.g., Sapienza, Roma Tre), local associations, and informal groups – operating under a shared, negotiated framework.
- **Iterative co-design:** Project development unfolds through **cycles of consultation, feedback, and redesign**, echoing the iterative logic of Living Labs. This is particularly evident in the reprogramming of the “piano libero” and the tailoring of social services to residents’ expressed needs.
- **Learning infrastructure:** The Laboratory not only implements but also **documents and reflects on processes**, producing governance knowledge that can be transferred or scaled to other contexts (e.g., the Lab is now in dialogue with similar initiatives in Tor Bella Monaca and Santa Maria della Pietà).

In contrast to traditional participatory mechanisms, which are often limited to public hearings or consultative boards, the Laboratory adopts a **model of embedded co-governance**. This means that citizens are not merely external observers but **co-producers of planning decisions**, contributing both their lived experiences and social knowledge.

This approach aligns with recent scholarship that frames Urban Living Labs as **transitional governance spaces** (Bulkeley et al., 2016) capable of mediating between formal institutions and grassroots innovation. The Laboratory acts as an **intermediary arena** where diverse rationalities – bureaucratic, political, civic – are negotiated and recomposed into shared actions.

Moreover, the Laboratory has become a **site of institutional learning**, allowing Roma Capitale to experiment with regulatory flexibility, cross-sectoral coordination, and capacity-building in a low-risk, high-feedback environment – precisely the conditions recommended in the literature for successful ULL implementation (Nevens et al., 2013; Marvin et al., 2018).

Perhaps the most important legacy of the Laboratory is cultural: it fosters an alternative narrative about Corviale, moving beyond stigma toward a **collective re-imagining of the city**. Demonstrating that collaborative processes can be compelling, legitimate, and inclusive contributes to a shift in the institutional mindset of public administration.

As Rome looks to scale similar approaches to other neighbourhoods — including Tor Bella Monaca and Santa Maria della Pietà — the Corviale experience offers a **blueprint for cultivating a city-wide Living Lab ecosystem**, where regeneration is understood not as an intervention in the territory but **with and through it**.

4. Toward a Strategic Description of the Plan: PUI and the Monumental Archaeological Center

Currently, two coordinated efforts can be identified in Rome as attempts to develop a more strategic reading of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR): the **Integrated Urban Programs (PUI)** and the **Fori Project**, specifically, the projects related to the **Monumental Archaeological Centre of Rome (CArMe)**.

The three PUI initiatives are described as **innovation hubs** that combine interventions on the built environment and the creation of public spaces with the ambition of integrating **immaterial (social and relational) projects** aimed at supporting physical redevelopment through responses to the **real needs of the local communities**.

This aspect has been strongly emphasised by the work of the **Special Commission on the PNRR (CS PNRR)**, which has held a series of hearings on the implementation of the PUIs. These meetings have involved actors from the **third sector, trade unions, and neighbourhood associations**, all engaged in building paths toward meaningful integration. One concrete result of these participatory processes has been the **issuance of calls for expressions of interest** by the Department of Social Affairs for the **co-design of interventions** within the PUIs, which will also benefit from additional resources — approximately **€10 million** from the PON Metro fund (currently being finalised).

Among the **immaterial projects** included in the PUIs is the **experimental adoption of active labour policies**, inspired by the French model of Territoires zéro chômeur de longue durée ("Territories with Zero Unemployment"). The PUIs are further reinforced by the development of **30 Civic Hubs (Poli Civici)**, which together create a **strategic framework for the urban periphery** of Rome, structured around three principal axes (Corviale, Tor Bella Monaca, and Santa Maria della Pietà) and thirty civic nodes distributed across the city.

What is meant by "Civic Hub" is, in fact, a central question being addressed through these projects. For example, the transformation of a local library into a **Civic Hub** provides an opportunity to design a **context-sensitive offering of proximity services** tailored to the specific characteristics and needs of each neighbourhood. The Civic Hub thus becomes a flexible infrastructure, adaptable to local differences and a vehicle for redefining the scale and nature of urban welfare.

The **Monumental Archaeological Centre of Rome (CArMe)** is a project currently under development by **Walter Tocci**, whom the Mayor has appointed to coordinate interventions in the areas of the **Imperial Fora, the Colosseum Park, the Circus Maximus, the Celio Hill, and the Archaeological Promenade (Passeggiata Archeologica)**.

This initiative builds upon the vast set of investments launched under the Caput Mundi programme — not only those developed by Roma Capitale but also those promoted by the Ministry of Culture — with the objective of delineating a **comprehensive and unified strategy** for the archaeological heart of the city.

Naturally, the project is also being developed in alignment with the **Jubilee 2025**. It revives the conceptual thread of long-term reflection, dating back to Leonardo Benevolo's **Progetto Fori** (1985), reactivating the ambition to make the monumental core of ancient Rome **more accessible, integrated, and coherent**, both in terms of urban form and cultural function.

5. Conclusion – Beyond the PNRR: Strategic Futures and the Urban Agenda for the EU

The implementation of the PNRR in Rome offers not just a case study in urban resilience under extraordinary conditions but a window into the possible futures of urban governance in Europe. While the PNRR was born as a crisis-driven funding mechanism, its unintended consequence has been to expose both the latent capacities and systemic shortcomings of local administrations. In Rome, this stress test has produced a response that is

not only reactive but, in many respects, structurally transformative (Viesti, 2023).

The introduction of dedicated institutional frameworks (DPSP PNRR and CS PNRR), the successful engagement of civil society, and the embedding of participatory practices in the design of public investment all point to a more mature, place-based model of urban policymaking. These developments contrast sharply with Italy's traditional model of urban governance, which has long been characterised by fragmentation and limited strategic capacity at the local level.

As the 2026 deadline approaches, the sustainability of this transformation is far from guaranteed. The risk is that institutional innovations may be dismantled once the extraordinary funding cycle ends – a step backwards when cities must act as frontline actors in addressing climate, social, and digital challenges.

In this context, the Urban Agenda for the EU is crucial. Since its launch in 2016, it has evolved to give cities a role in shaping EU policies. The New Leipzig Charter and Ljubljana Agreement promote integrated, place-based, multi-level governance – principles Rome has already put into practice.

Italy now faces the task of institutionalising these practices. The PNRR has been a stress test; now, it must become a foundation. The Urban Agenda should guide ordinary planning, supported by:

- Long-term funding for cities;
- Stronger inter-municipal governance;
- Enhanced capacity building and civic participation.

Rome can become a living laboratory for the Urban Agenda – not just reacting to emergencies but planning its future. The real goal is not merely to administer funds but to institutionalise the capacity for continuous, democratic, and inclusive urban change.

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