

Black and White Thinking

The *Nuova Pianta di Roma* (1748) by Giovanni Battista Nolli and the postmodern understanding of public and private space

Abstract

The *Nuova Pianta di Roma* by Giovanni Battista Nolli (1748), one of the first ‘figure-ground diagrams’ in the history of cartography, is viewed, above all in the United States, as marking the starting point of the awareness of public and private space. In this context, it is believed that the black areas represent private spaces and the white areas, public. This interpretation was first put forward by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in their theses for *Learning from Las Vegas* (1968/1972). Subsequently, it was adopted and strengthened first by the ‘Roma interrotta’ project (1978) and then by a number of postmodern theorists.

This essay examines this postmodern thesis through an analysis of the original Nolli Map, taking into consideration the existing architectural and urban structures and their practical, social, and cultural functions and uses in 18th-century Rome.

The comparison of the postmodern interpretation of the Nolli Map with the urban reality in the 18th century results in a fundamental criticism of the postmodern understanding of history, the city, buildings, and space.

Keywords

Public, Postmodernism, Nolli, Roma interrotta, Robert Venturi, Las Vegas