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Nero watched the conflagration from the Tower of Maecenas, enraptured by what he called “the beauty of the flames”; then put on his tragedian’s costume and sang *The Sack of Troy from beginning to end.*

— Suetonius¹

In mid-July of 64 CE, a fire of epic proportions swept through the imperial capital of Rome. When the nine-day conflagration was finally extinguished, three of the city’s fourteen districts had been completely destroyed, and seven more were in shambles.² A stunning lack of uniformity among historical accounts makes it unlikely anyone will ever know how the blaze began, but it has long been suspected it was the work of arsonists.³ The scale of the

disaster for ordinary Romans was only magnified when the Emperor Nero opportunistically diverted funds from his own “disaster-relief” programs to construct a private pleasure palace, the sprawling Domus Aurea (Golden House), in the crowded center of the city.

Considering the grandeur and architectural innovation of the Domus Aurea, it is telling that only one of its wings survived through later generations—and even then only as a foundation for a subsequent, immense bathing complex. More significant still was the fact that its most prodigal element, a gigantic artificial lake, was eventually supplanted by a pointedly public symbol, the Colosseum.⁴ Never before had the building of such a large-scale amphitheater been attempted in Rome or its provinces. The credit for its construction, however, belonged to the succeeding Flavian dynasty. Nero’s downfall was assured by his post-fire rebuilding program, which failed to achieve any truly public end and neglected the greater good of the *plebs urbana*.⁵

Above: Rome’s Fire of 64 C.E. The painting depicts the fire as seen from the banks of the Tiber River. Hubert Robert—“Fire of 18 July 64 AD” © Ville du Havre, Musée Malraux. Photo by Florian Kleinfenn.

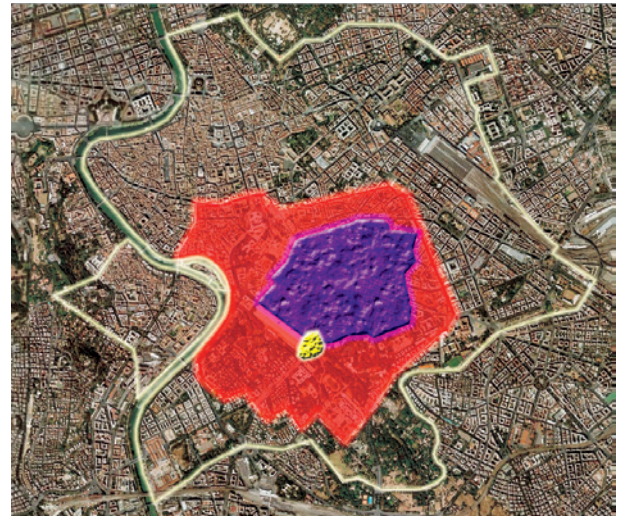
An Epic Fire Brings a Golden House

Nero's standing among the citizens of Rome was not initially so poisoned. Indeed, the first years of his reign were characterized by generally conciliatory dealings with the Roman people, including his reversal of many unpopular dictums and a return to traditional Augustan values.⁶ In direct contrast to conceptions of him as a vicious tyrant, his first five years were considered a model chapter in Roman history, and were later dubbed the "Quinquennium Neronis" by the popular emperor Trajan.⁷ But the young emperor soon sought freedom from any possible constraint, and was rumored to have orchestrated the murder of his wife and mother and the removal of both of his principal advisors.⁸ He also began to exhibit signs of self-indulgent theatricality and megalomania, often playing the lyre or acting on stage in the various guises of Apollo, the god of the sun. Some have posited that the emperor haughtily fancied himself a god on earth. But although Nero's antics created immense unpopularity within the senatorial and patrician classes, they proved entertaining to the masses. He also catered to the *plebs urbana*, remaining extravagantly generous and partaking in many popular activities.⁹

This connection with the Roman *plebs* was tested by the fire of 64. According to modern interpretation, however, his initial architectural and planning responses were surprisingly commendable.¹⁰ After the fire, Nero changed the face of Rome through the rationality and ingenuity of his builders. He also inaugurated a revolution in imperial building design through the work of his architects Severus and Celer.¹¹ Tacitus and Suetonius speak strikingly of the creation of an *urbs nova*, a new city, under Nero in the wake of the fire.¹²

Nero's progressive solutions devoted equal attention to beautification and to new safety measures. Streets were widened from meandering paths to broad avenues; building heights were restricted; and large open squares were created to hinder the spread of flames. Moreover, a series of new codes ensured that buildings would be erected *sine trabibus* (without timbers). This language may be interpreted either as a prohibition against timber framing in floors, roofs, and walls, or as a call for vaulted concrete structures. The second interpretation seems most in line with known Neronian archaeological remnants; however, both interpretations imply a complete change in the character of Roman buildings.

The ancient sources also make reference to the imperial funding of porticoes for new apartment buildings, implying that either colonnades or arcades were commissioned

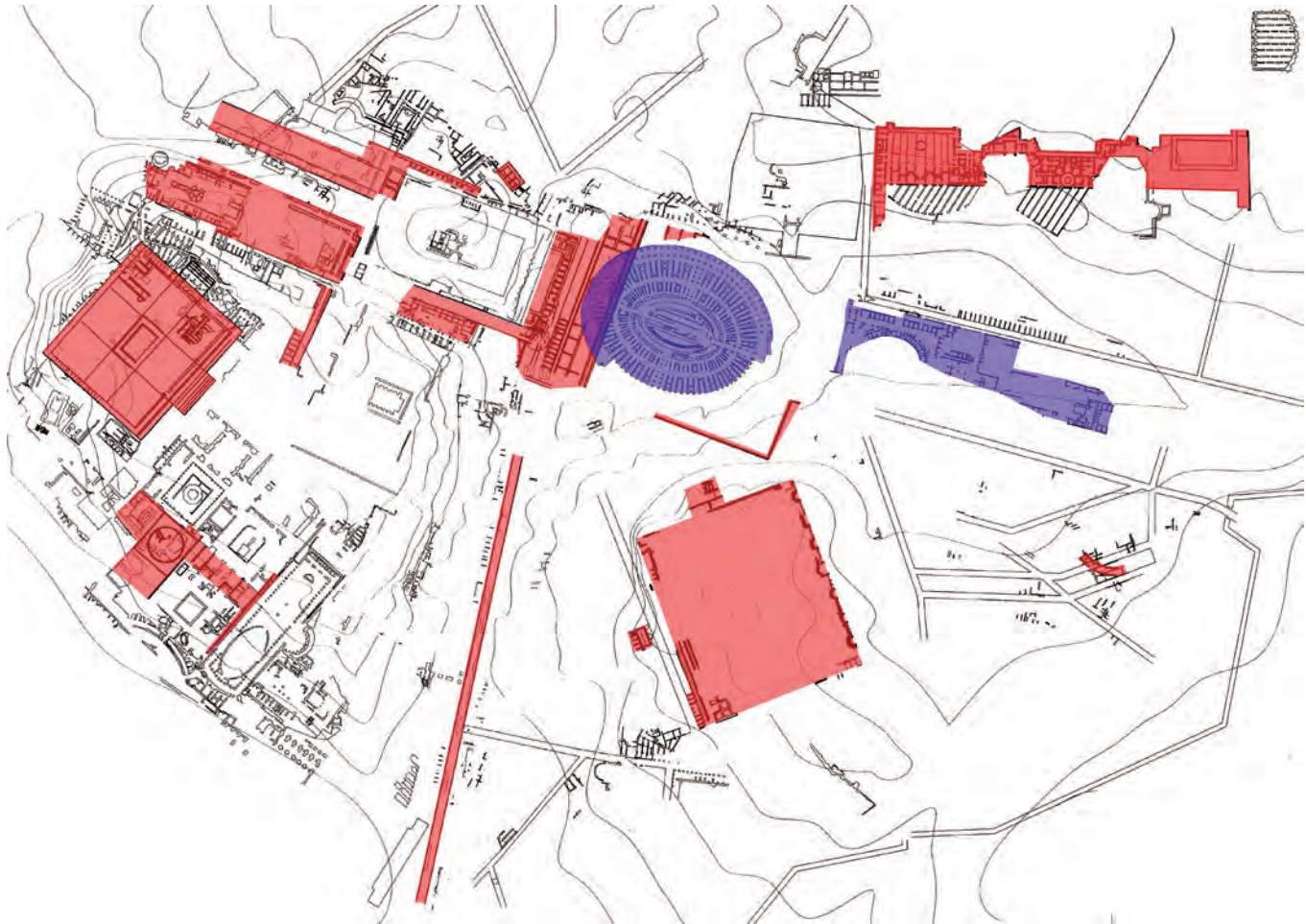


to line entire blocks of the new city. Such structures would both beautify the city and allow firefighters easy access to the upper floors of adjoining residential complexes.¹³ However, this singular and isolated mention of a pledge of state funding raises important questions regarding the allocation of Nero's official "fire relief fund." This enlisted vast sums of money from the city and its provinces, and by all accounts, Nero diverted much of it to the construction of the Domus Aurea.¹⁴

In the tabula rasa condition following the catastrophe, the state had the opportunity to activate a program of architectural innovation to rescue the city. But Nero's arrogant financial directives instead stressed development only within the grounds of the Domus Aurea. Nero was already held in growing contempt by the patrician class, but the *plebs urbana* soon also came to resent his rule when they realized his palace and its gardens would eliminate the viability of central Rome as a city.¹⁵ The value of the architectural innovations introduced in the emerging complex by Severus and Celer were thus overshadowed by its encroachments on formerly urban areas.¹⁶

In place of the tight pre-fire fabric of central Rome, Nero's palace was to be a *rus in urbis*, a villa stretching from the original, sanctioned republican palaces on the Palatine Hill across the valley in each direction and ascending the Velian, Oppian, Caelian, and Esquiline

Above: Conjectured total extent of the fire. Ancient city limits outlined; epicenter of fire in yellow; probable extent of the fire in red; grounds of the Domus Aurea in purple. After a modern satellite image taken from GoogleEarth.



Hills. A massive artificial lake would serve as the centerpiece for its grounds, which would hold nymphaeums, fountains, and baths fed by devoted aqueducts, as well as scattered pavilions and a monumental vestibule for the infamous Colossus of Nero.¹⁷

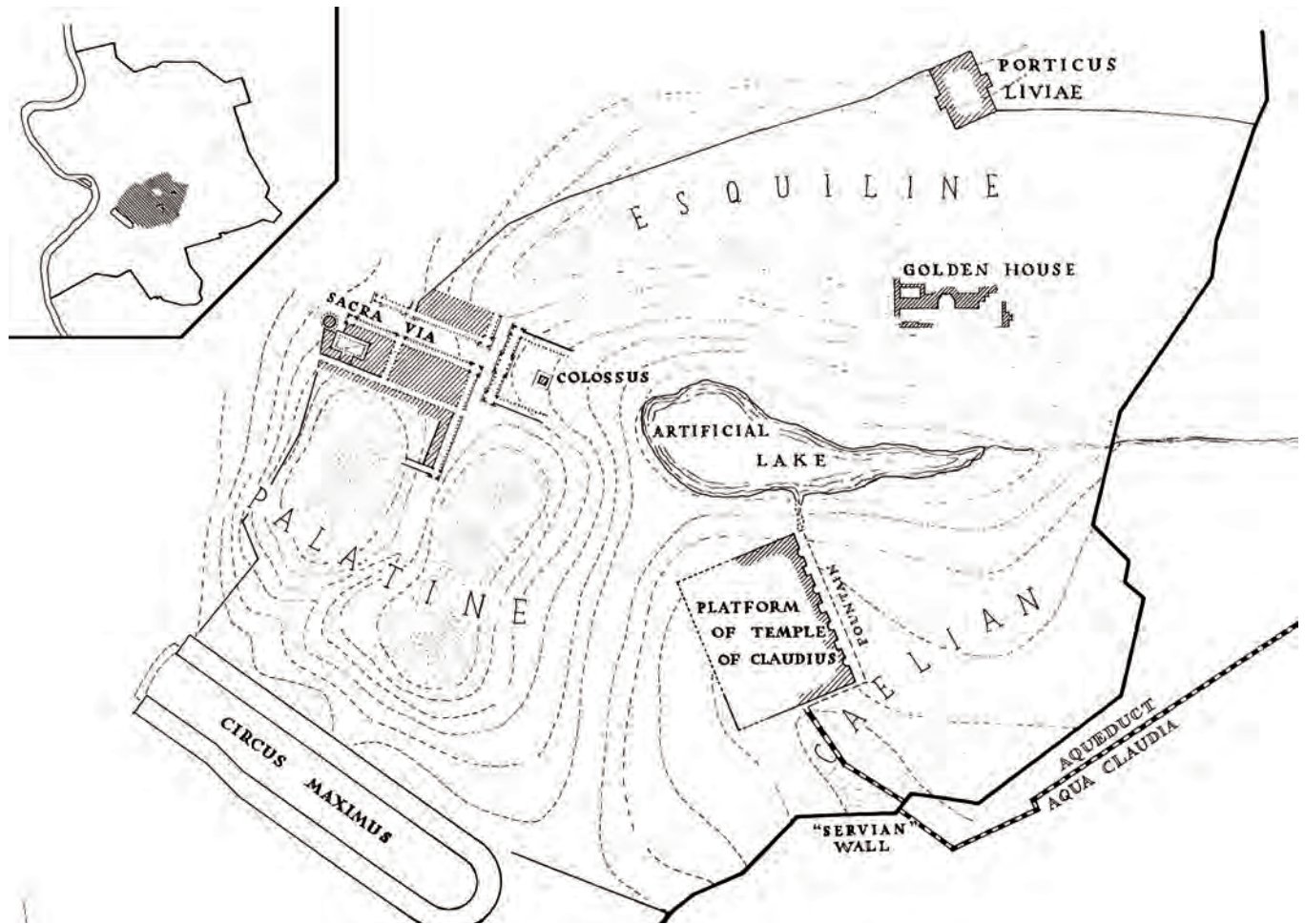
It is no accident that most of these architectural features were demolished in succeeding decades, or that they were replaced by some of the most enduring structures of the imperial city.¹⁸ Indeed, the expansive symbol of the Domus Aurea was an agent in Nero's downfall. And when public dissatisfaction with his tax policies bred insurrection, he took his own life in late 68 CE, and left it unfinished.

Above: The Colosseum Valley. Structures existing within the grounds of Nero's Domus Aurea in red; structures attributed to the Flavian emperors in purple. After Steinby (1995), p. 397, fig. 18, attributed to G. Schingo, C. Panella, and M. Fano.

A New Plan for the Restoration of Rome

Nero's death had left Rome in confusion and disarray, and eventually the vengeance to be enacted upon him would be personified by the soldier-emperor Vespasian and his two sons Titus and Domitian.¹⁹ Vespasian entered Rome in 70 CE, only six years after the fire, to the immense fanfare that accompanied his vanquishing of tyranny after a year-long civil war. He brought a multi-faceted plan to expel all memory of Nero. Its first step was to blame the former emperor for the persistent troubles of post-fire Rome.²⁰

It had now been more than a decade since the "Quinquennium Neronis," and the public—having had their fill of financial instability and private socio-political gain—embraced Flavian propaganda vilifying Nero. It was also increasingly easy to forget the aspirations of the Domus Aurea. Vespasian was understandably averse to



finishing any part of it, and instead began to dismantle it piece by piece. Likewise, Nero's admirable architectural plans for the city soon proved expendable, and his beautification program was sublimated to the construction of blatant symbols of prosperity brought by the Flavians.²¹

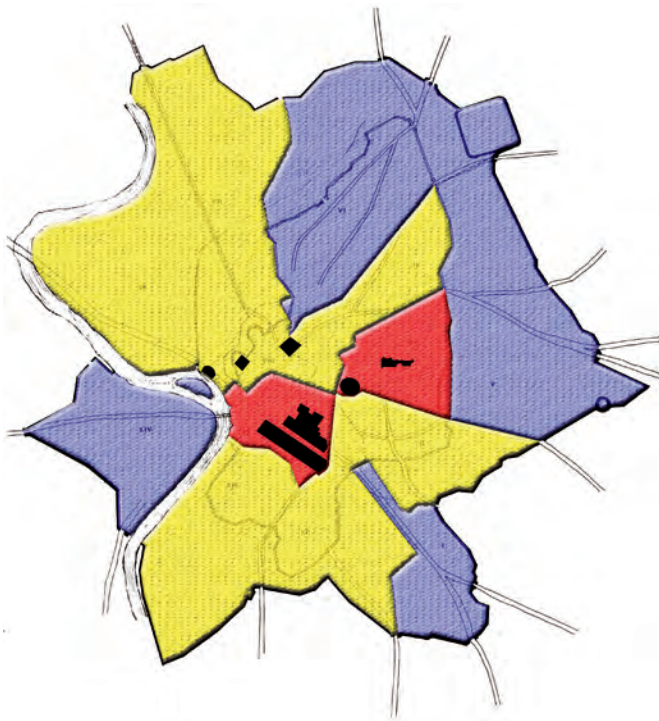
Vespasian's strategy of erasure involved both a festival atmosphere, created by triumphal parades and display of spoils from the Jewish wars, and the construction of new public architectural and artistic works. One of his first acts was to restore the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, the foremost Roman shrine on the Capitoline Hill, which had been damaged by the fire. He also paid artisans to restore the famous statue the Venus of Cos and to rebuild the stage at the Theater of Marcellus, allowing it to reopen immediately.²²

Vespasian also took direct aim at Nero's memory. He rechristened the infamous 120-foot-tall bronze Colossus of Nero as a statue of Apollo. And he dispersed the visible

parts of the Domus Aurea, and commissioned the new Flavian Amphitheater (the Colosseum) where he had drained Nero's vast artificial lake. For the *plebs urbana*, Nero's lake was a symbol of all the excesses of the Domus Aurea, and of the expansion of the imperial decorative program within the city. The new amphitheater stood in dramatic opposition to Nero's palatial private halls, a deliberate gesture of Rome's return to its citizens.²³

Martial recounts the extravagant dedication of the Colosseum in this poem from the *Liber Spectaculorum*:

Above: The grounds of Nero's Domus Aurea. The map depicts the main structures of the Domus Aurea: the domestic Esquiline wing, the artificial lake, the platform of the Temple of Claudius, the constructions of the Via Sacra, the vestibule for the Colossus of Nero, and the devoted aqueduct. After Ward-Perkins (1994), p. 60, fig. 26, drawing by Sheila Gibson.



Here, where the starry colossus sees the constellations close at hand and a lofty framework rises in the middle of the road, the hated halls of a cruel king used to gleam and in the whole city there was only one house standing. Here, where the awesome bulk of the amphitheatre soars before our eyes, once lay Nero's pools. Here, where we marvel at the swift blessings of the baths, an arrogant estate had robbed the poor of their dwellings. Where the Claudian portico weaves its spreading shade marks the point at which the palace finally stopped. Rome has been restored to herself, and with you in charge, Caesar, what used to be the pleasure of a master is now the pleasure of the people.²⁴

Martial's use of the language of Flavian propaganda reflected the success of Vespasian's goal in erecting the grand public structure. The poem demonizes the Domus Aurea, using "hated halls" and "arrogant estate" to describe their impact on the *plebs*. At the same time it glorifies the Flavian structures of the amphitheater and the baths of Titus as grand public gestures for the citizens of Rome. The epigram clearly indicates a perceived change for the better, and spotlights both the Flavian successes and the Neronian failures.

Interpreting Architectural Symbolism

During the reign of Vespasian, Nero was vilified for his selfish and malicious choices. Instead of following his former populist agenda in the face of public calamity, he abused his power by diverting public relief funds to his own highly visible and luxurious project. As a result, its actual innovations were marginalized, overshadowed by the flagrant symbolism of seeking to transform much of central Rome into a sprawling private estate.

Instead of restoring the urban territory after the fire, Nero created a second major disaster in the heart of the city. The architectural merit of his plans thus proved inconsequential compared to the politics that brought it to fruition. The gross misuse of funds and blatant disregard for public policy made it easy to blame Nero for all the city's misfortunes. It only required a well-placed Flavian propaganda machine to reconcile people to this view.

Historical opinion has judged the Colosseum a highly successful structure, a transcendental symbol of Imperial Rome. But its creation owes much to its original purpose as a gesture of reconciliation. More than anything, these events demonstrate that an excessive private venture in the face of a shared disaster cannot achieve virtuous ends, and cannot be attempted without the willing participation of the public.

Architectural projects are powerful public symbols, and their efficacy often rests on their ability to embody the values that breed them. In the face of an epic catastrophe, architecture's symbolic potency was exaggerated in the eyes of the citizens of Rome, and sealed the fates of both Nero and Vespasian.

Notes

1. Taken from *Nero* 38, in Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 237.
2. The notation here refers to the Augustan districts, first formulated in 7 BCE, and in use at the time of the fire. The fire was centered in the shops at the eastern corner of the Circus Maximus in District XI, and spread in all directions. For discussion of the districts and boundaries, see J. Bert Lott, *The Neighborhoods of Augustan Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
3. The three historical sources for the fire are Dio Cassius, *Dio's Roman History VIII: Books LXI-LXX*, trans. Earnest Cary (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), pp. 111-17; Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, pp. 236-37; and Tacitus, *The Annals*, trans. A.J. Woodman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), pp. 322-26. Dio and Suetonius relate that imperial attendants set the fires under order from Nero. Tacitus records these beliefs only as rumors.
4. Construction of a large amphitheater has been identified in modern scholarship as one of the most public gestures a Roman leader could make to his people. The subsequent history of Rome is littered with references to the free spectacles

convened in the Colosseum, including gladiatorial games, mock military battles, and food distribution. See, for example, Filippo Coarelli et al., *The Colosseum*, trans. Mary Becker (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2001).

5. The plebeians were the commoners of Roman society. They were located in the socio-political strata below the patrician class, and were divided between the *plebs urbana* (in the city) and the *plebs rustica* (in the country). The quality of life of the *plebs urbana* owed much to the goodwill of the emperor and the consuls, who controlled the city's grain supply, aqueducts, roads, and general upkeep.

6. David Shotter, *Nero* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 22. Augustus, the first emperor of Rome, exemplified a model of urban administration.

7. Jurgen Malitz, *Nero*, trans. Allison Brown (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 17–18; and Shotter, *Nero*, pp. 23–25. During these years, Nero demonstrated sound judicial and financial management, and according to tradition rejected extravagant titles like *pater patriae* and suggestions that his birth month be made the first of the year.

8. Michael Grant, *Nero* (New York: Dorset Press, 1970), p. 115; and Shotter, *Nero*, p. 29.

9. Amanda Claridge, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 15.

10. Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 179; Richard Holland, *Nero: The Man Behind the Myth* (Gloucestershire: Sutton, 2000), p. 61; and Vasily Rudich, *Political Dissidence Under Nero: The Price of Dissimulation* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 85.

11. Ironically, this was most evident in the Domus Aurea, itself. The architectural revolution under Nero is discussed in William McDonald, *The Architecture of the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 3, and expanded upon in the following chapter.

12. McDonald notes that planners of the new urban architecture and authors of the building codes were professionals, probably in the employ of the government. Nero's government neither opposed nor obstructed the new planning; instead, it encouraged the changes.

13. Mention found in Tacitus, 15.43.1–2, pp. 324–25; importance summarized in Claridge, *Rome*, pp. 15–16, and McDonald, *The Architecture of the Roman Empire*, p. 28.

The porticoes were the only part of the construction effort that were attributed to imperial funding. Tacitus does not mention any other aspect that had a similar pledge from Nero.

14. Dio, 62.18.5, p. 117; Suetonius, *Nero* 38, p. 236; and Tacitus, 15.43.2 and 15.45.1, pp. 325–26.

15. An anonymous epigram is recorded in Suetonius, *Nero* 39, p. 238: "The Palace is spreading and swallowing Rome! Let us all flee to Veii and make it our home. Yet the Palace is growing so damnably fast, that it threatens to gobble up Veii at last."

16. The innovations are further discussed in Jas Elsner, "Constructing Decadence: The Representation of Nero as Imperial Builder," in *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History, and Representation*, ed. Jas Elsner and Jamie Masters, pp. 112–27 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Elisabetta Segala and Ida Sciortino, *Domus Aurea* (Rome: Electa, 2005); Larry F. Ball, *The Domus Aurea and the Roman Architectural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Axel Boethius, *The Golden House of Nero: Some Aspects of Roman Architecture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960); and Mark P.O. Morford, "The Distortion of the Domus Aurea Tradition," *Eranos* 66 (1968), pp. 158–79.

17. A comprehensive summary of the elements, along with a broad site analysis, is given in J.B. Ward-Perkins, *Roman Imperial Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 59–60. In this summary, the principal arrogance in Nero's plan is accentuated by the fact that when one stands on the terrace of the domestic wing, the buildings of the city of Rome cannot be seen. They are instead replaced with a bucolic landscape stretching as far as the eye can see.

18. Ward-Perkins cites the following structures as examples of replacements of Nero's buildings: Templum Pacis, Temple of Venus and Rome, Colosseum, Baths of Titus, Baths of Trajan, and Flavian Palace. The domestic wing of the Domus Aurea survived long enough to be incorporated into the foundations of the Baths of Trajan, and another section of the *Domus Aurea* survives in the foundations of Domitian's Domus Flavia.

19. Vespasian emerged after the "Year of the Four Emperors," and it would fall on him to rebuild the city and reconcile the abuses of Nero. See B.H. Warmington, *Nero: Reality and Legend* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981), p. 130. Suetonius relates in *Vespasian* 8, pp. 287–88, that Vespasian inherited a city still "made unsightly by fires and collapsed buildings."

20. Vespasian's arrival in Rome is documented firsthand in Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 379–380; Vespasian's policy is covered extensively in Barbara Levick, *Vespasian* (London: Routledge, 1999).

21. Suetonius also makes note of the grumblings of the plebeians in response to imposed changes to the previously tight urban fabric in the center of Rome. The subsequent public acceptance of Nero's vilification was exceedingly easy, due in no small part to the Vespasianic damnation of Nero's memory, the *damnatio memoriae*. For a further discussion of the denigration of imperial predecessors, see Edwin S. Ramage, "Denigration of Predecessor Under Claudius, Galba, and Vespasian," *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte* 32, No. 2 (1983), pp. 201–14.

22. Suetonius, *Vespasian* 18, pp. 291–92.

23. Vespasian was indeed deified after his death in 79 CE, something that hadn't been done since Claudius in 54 CE.

24. Martial's Epigram 2, translation taken from Martial, *M. Valerii Martialis Liber Spectaculorum*, trans. and ed. Kathleen M. Coleman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 14.

Opposite: The fire's impact on the districts of Rome. The map depicts the extent to which the fire destroyed the Augustan districts of Rome. Districts completely destroyed are in red (III, X, XI); districts partially destroyed are in yellow (II, IV, VII, VIII, IX, XII, XIII); districts spared are in purple (I, V, VI, XIV). The structures in black, clockwise from upper left, represent the sites of the Theater of Marcellus, the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, the Templum Pacis, the Esquiline wing of the Domus Aurea, the Colosseum, the Palatine Palaces, and the Circus Maximus. After Stambaugh (1988), p. 83, fig. 6, drawing by E. H. Riorden.