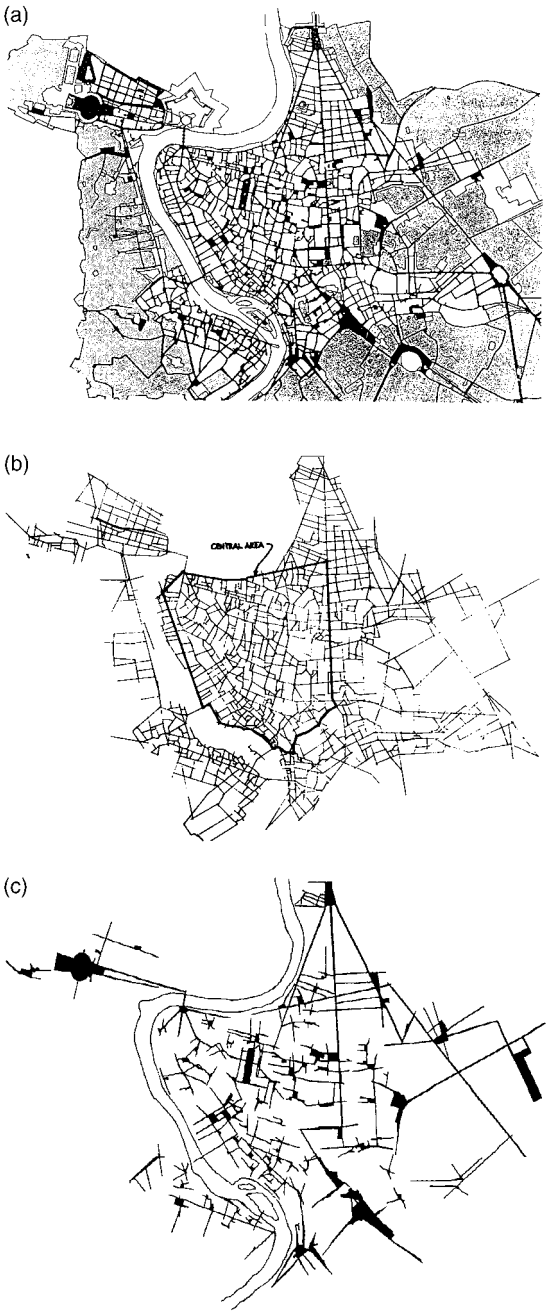

FIGURE 28.2
(a) Plan of Rome, Italy; (b) Axial map of Rome, Italy; (c) Public open spaces in Rome.

a set of potentials, and that we exploit these potentials as individuals and collectivities in using space. It is this that makes the relation between space and function analysable, and to some extent predictable. By dividing up urban space, which is necessarily continuous, in different formal ways we are likely to be dividing it up according to some aspect of how human beings function.

Consider, for example, Fig. 28.2a which is the plan of Rome, in which the customary representation with the buildings in black and the space white has been reversed to draw attention to the fact that it is the black structure of space that is our focus of concern.[5] Figure 28.2b is then one possible structure within Fig. 28.2, the fewest and longest lines that cover the open space of Rome, and therefore form its potential route matrix. Figure 28.2c is another such structure: all the convex elements we call public open spaces together with their isovists. By definition, this includes all the lines that pass through the spaces and relate them in the urban structure as a whole. Note how they link up to form global clusters. We immediately see how mistaken we would be to see Roman squares as local elements. The isovists show they also form a global pattern.

All these ways of looking at space can be seen as layers of spatial structuring, coexisting within the same plan, each with its own contribution to intelligibility and function. A spatial layout can thus be seen as offering different functional potentials. What is it like to move around in it? Does it have potential to generate interaction? Can strangers understand it? And so on. All these questions are about the relationship of space as formal potentials to different aspects of function. A layout can thus be represented as a different kind of spatial system according to what aspects of function we are interested in.

The shape of space in the City of London

Let us now look in more detail at a case that is much closer to home: the City of London, for no better reason than that it has been as often criticized as 'haphazard' as praised as 'organic' – but never explained properly. The plan of the 'square mile' (in fact it is neither square nor a mile) is shown in Fig. 28.3a using the black on white convention to emphasize that it is space we are looking at. Figure 28.3b homes in on one of the allegedly 'labyrinthian' back areas of the City between Cornhill and Lombard Street, taken from the Rocque map of 1746. We say allegedly because although it looks so in plan, it does not seem in the least labyrinthian to the person moving at ground level. On the contrary, it seems highly intelligible. How does this happen? The technique