At the dawn of the twentieth century, the idea of widening historic streets as a way to modernize cities gripped urban planners across the Western world who were desperate to alleviate traffic congestion, one of the palpable downsides of industrialization. The idea of street widening was related to, but less grandiose than, the earlier nineteenth century technique of cutting boulevards through existing urban blocks, as Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809-1891) had famously done in Paris. It was, however, just as damaging to historic neighborhoods, which lost entire street frontages. Because the idea of historic neighborhoods had not yet coalesced, resistance to street widenings often organized around the preservation of particularly important monuments, such as in 1908, when the congregation of St. John’s Chapel unsuccessfully attempted to save the building from the widening of Varick Street in Manhattan. Preservationists sometime took heroic engineering actions, as during the 1920s when the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities successfully saved Boston’s Harrison Gray Otis House (1796) from the widening of Cambridge Street by moving it (minus the original cellar) 40 feet back. Gustavo Giovannoni (1873-1947) initiated a wholesale rethinking of how urban planners should approach the modernization of historic cities, and seeded the idea of historic districts. Instead of looking at large scale traffic patterns he asked designers to look closer at the fabric and character of the historic streets. By looking closer, at the architectural scale, they would be able to fix traffic problems through punctual interventions instead of entire street demolitions (e.g. demolishing an insignificant corner building to accommodate the turning radius of buses, etc). Translating his theory of diradamento as “pruning” may be somewhat misleading: pruning seems to point to an action that is primarily cosmetic. Diradamento is from diradare (to make something rado, raro, i.e., less thick or dense). Diradare, however, is ultimately synonymous with allargare, to enlarge, to open up, to make room, to space things apart, and in this sense was connected to older theories of urban expansion, such as those of Ildefonso Cerdà and Camillo Sitte. Giovannoni was a polymath, trained in engineering, public health, architecture and architectural history. He was also a great institutional leader and promoter of architecture and preservation. In 1910 he became president of the Associazione Artistica fra i Cultori di Architettura, which promoted conservation of historic architecture. He taught architecture at the University of Rome's engineering school beginning in 1914, and agitated for the formation of an independent School of Architecture. When the first School of Architecture within an Italian University was founded in Rome, he served as its Director from 1927 to 1935, and as Chair of Documentation and Restoration of Monuments. A tireless organizer, he also founded the Centro di Studi di Storia dell' Architettura (1938), and cofounded the journals Architettura e Arti Decorative (1921) with Marcello Piacentini (1881-1960), and Palladio (1937). He involved himself particularly in planning questions with regard to Rome's historic quarters, as a practicing architect, a member of numerous planning commissions. He followed Camilo Boito in what concerned architectural restorations, but Giovannoni’s original thinking on urban preservation helped change how historic cities were modernized, especially after he presented his theory at the First International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments in Athens in 1931, and it was absorbed into the ensuing and widely influential Athens Charter.

Keywords: Urbanism, Planning, Health, Aesthetics, Character, District