

“Any innovation in Rome has always been preceded by harsh debate.”



Pacis Moderna

After more than half a century of stagnation, the Eternal City lives up to its name and makes peace with Modern architecture.

It is no secret that Richard Meier’s new Ara Pacis museum—the first building to be constructed in Rome’s historical center since the Fascist era—has been controversial. After six years interrupted by delays the new home for the eponymous peace altar, built in 9 BC by Emperor Augustus, was finally unveiled on April 21. And judging from the overall response, it seems that when the museum is completed in September Romans will have grown more receptive to its Modernist design—and to the very idea of contemporary architecture in the city center.

Commissioned by former mayor Francesco Rutelli, the museum has been the object of extreme political posturing. “Of course the intervention was tied to various motivations—some political—because it was one of the first projects initiated by the new center-left government,” says Roberto Morassut, director of city planning. The loudest criticism has come from the right, most famously voiced by flamboyant former undersecretary of culture Vittorio Sgarbi, who appeared the night of the inauguration as a judge for an ice-dancing competition.

With mayoral elections approaching, right-wing challenger Gianni Alemanno announced that he would relocate the museum to the periphery of the city. Downplaying the controversy, Rutelli says, “Any innovation in Rome has always been preceded by harsh debate, including the churches on this piazza. We have more than two

thousand years of history, so the issues are complicated.”

The most common concern has been that Meier’s stark white building would contrast with its surroundings. The pavilion that previously housed the monument—built in 1938 by Benito Mussolini based on a design by Jewish architect Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo—was smaller. However, the new complex incorporates an auditorium and a terrace café. “Before this, the best news for the piazza in sixty years was the opening of some new restaurants,” Rutelli says. “Now there is vitality and architecture here.” The museum’s grand entry steps and cascading fountain will also define a new public plaza. And it is now apparent that its roofline is level with those on the adjacent piazza. “I like the actual building better than I did the design,” notes Livio Sacchi, regional director of the National Institute of Architecture. “It is in scale with those around it and in proportion to the ancient monument, which looks like a jewel from across the river when it is lit up at night.”

Indeed Meier’s glass curtain walls privilege the classical monument while the freestanding travertine ones mirror the piazza’s Fascist facades. “Meier was an appropriate choice because his architectural language stems from Italian Rationalism,” says Amedeo Schiattarella, president of the Architects Association of Rome. “But Romans don’t like change. People were not really criticizing the building itself but using it in an intellectual polemic. Now we can discuss something that is built—it is a positive change.”

Perhaps not coincidentally, two days before the unveiling Mayor Walter Veltroni held a conference to present stunning new projects under way throughout the city by architects such as Odile Decq and Rem Koolhaas, who summed up the optimistic feeling of the assembly. “The special characteristic of Rome is the casualness with which it exists alongside its antiquities without fetishizing them,” he said. “I hope it can maintain this lack of intimidation.” —Cathryn Drake



The museum entryway (left) creates a new public space on the Piazza Augusto Imperatore.

Meier’s airy design (top) protects and showcases Rome’s ancient peace altar.

