

ROME'S NEW MUSEUM OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE IS BIG, BOLD, AND EMPTY

ZAHA MAXIMA



ROLAND HALBE

The opening of Zaha Hadid's MAXXI (an acronym for Museum of the Arts of the Twenty-First Century) on November 14 in Rome was a momentous occasion for so many reasons. Although the museum's design is revolutionary and extraordinarily complex by any standard, for a city that has long shunned new architecture—and is subject to the vagaries of Italian politics—its realization is something of a miracle. Completed ten years after the international competition at a cost of €150 million (about \$223 million), more than double the projected budget, Italy's

first national museum of contemporary art and architecture will encompass two institutions, administered jointly by directors Anna Mattiolo and Margherita Guccione.

Not long after groundbreaking in 2005, with only the foundations complete, the first installment of funds had already been spent and a government budget crisis made it unclear that the Ministry of Culture would be able to come up with more. Even so, the MAXXI has been largely immune to the type of controversy surrounding other recent architectural commissions,

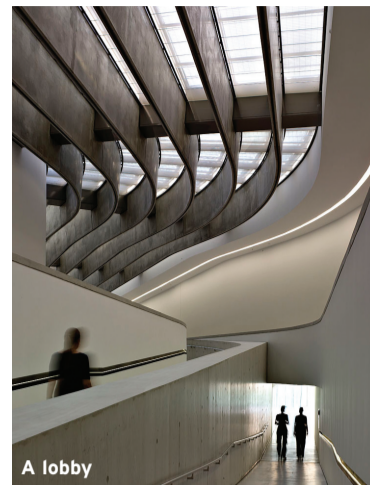
notably Richard Meier's Ara Pacis, which Rome's mayor made a campaign promise in 2008 to dismantle.

The MAXXI's sleek exterior conceals a baroque belly full of drunkenly tilting walls, undulating ramps that dissolve into space, and vertiginous cantilevers rotated around a soaring double-story atrium. Hadid's new Italian "creature," as the behemoth 322,000-square-foot museum has been called, was unveiled with theatrical panache as modern dancers, choreographed by Sasha Waltz, guided spectators through the pristine empty space. It was also a

creative way to inaugurate a museum sapped of the funds to mount a proper exhibition, thanks to cost overruns attributable mostly to the sheer technical difficulty of the construction.

Hadid's exuberant conceptual scribbles were transformed into concrete structure largely thanks to a structural engineering team with expertise in the restoration and reinforcement of ancient monuments, an important consideration in such a seismically active area. "The whole structure is more or less floating; there are relatively few points that actually touch the ground," said engineering consultant Federico Croci of Studio Croci & Associati. "But the most impressive thing about this building is the skeleton—it is like a wild animal." The crisscrossing horizontal strips of the structure traverse inside and out, oscillating and twisting so that walls seamlessly become floors, ceilings, and windows.

The last time anything of this scale was constructed in Rome was under Benito Mussolini, who exploited the use of monumental architecture as a demonstration of power. The Fascist dictator left a significant modernist architectural legacy, including the iconic Palazzo della Civiltà in the EUR quarter, and the neoclassical Foro Italico sports complex just across the river from the MAXXI. It is difficult to compete with the sweeping efficiency of dictatorships, especially under an epically unstable democratic government. But Rome's monumental scale demands



A lobby

RICHARD BRYANT

an architectural statement of suitably grand proportions, and MAXXI certainly fits the bill. Arguably the most successfully realized building by Hadid to date, this explosive colossus of glass, steel, and concrete could also be the Eternal City's first contemporary monument, putting it back on the architecture map.

The question that remains is whether the new museum will be a welcoming host to the institution's modest collection of contemporary art and architectural drawings, supplemented by an annual acquisition budget under \$4 million. The response of Paolo Colombo, the former director of MAXXI who oversaw the commission, was clear: "I don't care: The building itself is a masterpiece."

CATHRYN DRAKE

DESIMONE
 NEW YORK
 MIAMI
 SAN FRANCISCO
 NEW HAVEN
 LAS VEGAS
 HONG KONG
 ABU DHABI
 SHANGHAI

DeSimone Consulting Engineers is a global leader providing structural engineering services worldwide. We perform analysis and design for all types of buildings at all project phases and are committed to creating a better built environment. With 40 years of experience, our firm's breadth and diversity are key strengths enabling us to best serve our clients' needs.

100 11TH
 Client
 ALF NAMAN REAL ESTATE
 CAPE ADVISORS, INC.
 Architect
 ATELIERS JEAN NOUVEL
 BEYER BLINDER BELLE

www.de-simone.com

Click ● 143

DOM / VALCUCINE SHOWROOM & WAREHOUSE
Pre-RENOVATION SALE 40 - 70% OFF

66 Crosby Street (between Spring and Broome)
 Tel: 212-253-5969 Hours: Mon-Fri 11-7, Sat 12-6
 View our sale catalog at www.domshowrooms.com

VALCUCINE

MisuraEmme

Tacchini

Click ● 258