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## Places

### Title

Modern Currents Along the Tiber [Forum]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3fm6r2gb>

### Journal

Places, 14(3)

### ISSN

0731-0455

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### Publication Date

2002-06-01

Peer reviewed

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The American  
Institute of Architects  
Committee on Design

# Modern Currents Along the Tiber

For many tourists, Rome enchants with its quaint medieval and Renaissance buildings and art, as well as its treasures of imperial Roman antiquity, such as the Colosseum and the Pantheon. But there is also a modern Rome, dating to 1870, when the city became the capital of the newly unified country. How this new city took shape raises provocative questions for architecture. How can a fundamentally medieval and Renaissance city be transformed into a national capital? How is it possible to fit new structures into an ancient city fabric? What is or should be the relationship between archaeological artifact and living city? How have modern ideas on housing and urbanism provided decent environments for contemporary residents—or have they?

A good place to start is with twenty years of excavations in a derelict city block in the ghetto, which yielded the ruins of the Crypta Balbi, an enormous portico attached to a first century A.D. theater. Fragments from architectural and urban transformations over two millennia suddenly came to light. Now reconstructed as a museum, the Crypta Balbi meticulously displays each era, although physical and documentary material privileges medieval and ancient times. Such an extraordinary slice of urban history has no peer elsewhere in Rome, but it also represents one of many instances of the advancing museification of historic European city centers. Government offices, banks and insurance companies have extended their tentacles through ever greater sections of Rome, but while museums offer one means of preserving some places for the public, they are also problematic because they remove yet more buildings from a dwindling reserve of housing stock and shops that serve residents rather

than only tourists. The national government has continued to spread like an octopus in the city center, recently even taking over storage space at Borromini's University of S. Ivo and threatening scholarly research in the public archives of pre-1870 Rome.

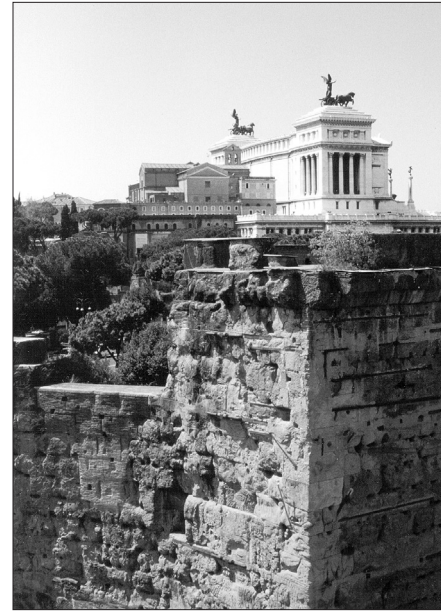
The recent transformation of diverse buildings into museums has been relentless: The former Acquarium (Ettore Bernich, 1883) is now a gallery for contemporary art; the Montemartini Museum (Francesco Stefanori, 1997), the former power plant, is now the sculpture gallery for the Capitoline Museum; the former papal stables (Scuderie Papali) at the Quirinale are now a museum of modern art (Gae Aulenti, 2000). In each case, unused structures were transformed into public settings for displays of art, some quite spectacularly. But they also left questions about the proliferation of museums in the historic center unanswered. Is this the only way to save a venerable building?

The decades of Fascist control represented a coordinated effort to channel growth in specific directions and to organize a group of fora which were to be of national rather than only urban significance. They were designed to draw government offices out of the densely inhabited center. E'42 (Exposition 1942, or EUR, Universal Exposition in Rome), located along the road to the sea to the south of the city, was the third and most massive forum established under Mussolini. Originally planned by Piacentini and consisting of buildings intended to host a world exhibition and, subsequently, government offices, E'42 instead became museums, convention centers and a business park for insurance, oil and airline companies. War canceled the exhibition, although many buildings were completed before 1943 and



These forum pages are produced under an agreement between *Places/Design History Foundation* and the American Institute of Architects. This article reports on the AIA Committee on Design's visit to Rome, April 21–26, 2001. The conference chair was Carol Rusche Bentel, AIA, and last year's committee chair was Wendy Evans Joseph, AIA.

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the fall of the Fascist regime. But the idea of shifting the center of government to a new zone, with adequate office and storage space, wide roads, adjacent housing and parking, was a wise plan unfortunately abandoned because of anti-Fascist sentiments, financial woes and speculative fever after the war.

Indeed, a distinctive feature of Italian modernism (Rationalism) was that it was bound up with Fascism; Mussolini sponsored many architectural styles, including that of the Rationalists. In the immediate aftermath of the war, then, architects struggled to identify a style untainted by Fascism. At the same time, an interest in emphasizing the social goals of architecture led designers to consider ways of designing housing estates for the growing

populations of Italian cities, where no city suffered a greater housing shortage than Rome.

The earliest and most significant housing project in post-war Rome, the INA-Casa housing estate in the Tiburtino quarter (Mario Ridolfi and Ludovico Quaroni, directors, 1950-55), exemplified the attempt to produce a Neorealist architecture in harmony with Neorealist cinema and literature. As interpreted in the Tiburtino project, this position meant opposing the stark modernism of northern Europe as well as the monumentalism and stripped classicism of the late 1930s, favoring instead a vernacular architecture linked to local culture and traditions. Unlike housing estates built between the wars, the Tiburtino design attempted to create the sensibility of a village in a locale to the far eastern periphery of the city. Apartment blocks of different scales and types (seven- to eight-story, three- to five-story, row houses) spread in almost random fashion on the site's gentle hills and created public and

semi-public spaces of diverse size and character. Although some details did recall rural precedents, the planning and design eliminated any hint of institutional housing, and residents are enormously proud of their housing complex and maintain it beautifully. Criticism of the project was based on the vernacular elements and the attempt to create a village; most of the designers subsequently repudiated it as a nostalgic aberration, and contemporary Roman architects are generally dismissive of it.

Compare the reaction to this development with that to architect Mario Fiorentino's Corviale (1974) on the city's western periphery. This one-kilometer-long, nine-story housing block sprawls in a long straight block across the rolling hills of the Agro Romano, isolated from any other suburban developments. The units meant to house shops were occupied by people desperate for housing, so the services originally planned for the complex were never completed; a single grocery store serves approxi-

Left: Montemartini Capitoline Museum (Francesco Stefanori, 1997)

Right: Roman Forum and Monument to Victor Emmanuel II (Giuseppe Sacconi, 1884-1913)  
Photos by Diane Ghirardo





mately 10,000 inhabitants. Residents feel little pride in their housing, noting that there is absolutely no sense of community because they encounter only their immediate neighbors. They demonstrate their disdain by failing to keep the grounds, stairs and other shared spaces clean and trash-free. By contrast with the Tiburtino project, this building is

Top: INA-Casa housing, Tiburtino quarter (Mario Ridolfi and Ludovico Quaroni, directors, 1950–1955)

Middle: Corviale housing project (Mario Fiorentino, 1974)

Bottom: Palazzo dei Congressi, atrium, EUR (Adalberto Libera, 1937–1942)

admired by the Roman architectural community; the idea was a brilliant one, many believe, that was not completed as intended. Others are appalled at both the idea and the realization, even while recognizing fine architectural details. To dismiss the Tiburtino project on the grounds of “nostalgia” ignores its success among inhabitants as an alternative to boring modernist blocks, while celebrating a project that residents found dehumanizing seems troubling. The disparate evaluation of these two complexes is symptomatic of the malaise of contemporary Roman architecture, in which abstract notions of style and correctness governed judgments. The debate that took shape around

these two housing estates is sharpened by the depressingly monotonous public and private housing projects surrounding Rome. Normally these buildings do not pop onto the radar screen of tourists dazzled by antique, Renaissance and Baroque Rome, and they are certainly no worse than the outskirts of many European cities. But this does not make them any more palatable.

How deeply imbricated all of the buildings in twentieth-century Rome were in the political and ideological battles of their own eras is hard to discount, but what may surprise is how politically charged most still are today, evident in the polemics over the new complex by Richard Meier to house the Ara Pacis (Altar of Peace). Like Renzo Piano’s design for an auditorium complex near the Mussolini forum, Zaha Hadid’s Center for Contemporary Art in former military barracks and Massimiliano Fuksas’ EUR Conference Center and his headquarters for the Italian Space Agency, Meier’s design for the Ara Pacis demonstrates the determination of Rome’s current government to make the city a center of contemporary and avant-garde architecture—an effort to give the city modern cachet, as if its storehouse of treasures were insufficient. The response of the Roman architectural community has been decidedly lukewarm, in part because the commission was awarded in 1996 without a competition, but also because the new structure disdains the adjacent monumental complex from the late 1930s.

Polemics over this project erupt repeatedly in Italian newspapers. An important monument with a much studied set of decorative friezes celebrating the accomplishments of Augustus Caesar, the Ara Pacis was

formerly set in a simple, modernist block (Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo, 1938) as part of a vast urban scheme centered on the ancient mausoleum of Augustus. Meier's plan includes a temperature and humidity controlled environment to replace a reinforced concrete structure bedeviled by water damage and leaks almost from the outset. The altar itself will be dwarfed by the new complex, which includes a museum and small auditorium, charge critics, who believe that the original structure could have been repaired. Right wing politicians see the enterprise as a politically motivated assault on a Fascist monument, a view that is not entirely unfounded, since support for the Meier design splits neatly along party lines. Publicity for the new structure also refers to it as the first work of modern architecture in the historic center since the Fascist period.

Precisely because of its hyper-modern style, Meier's design for the Ara Pacis is a lightning rod for a much broader debate on how an ancient city with a surplus of historic monuments can cope with the exigencies of a modern national capital. Such a discussion ends up focusing on style rather than far more significant questions about the insidious and almost invisible transformation of historic Rome from a complicated living city into a tourist enclave. In the end, the happiest conjunction of antique with twentieth century architecture may well be the extraordinary model of Imperial Rome on display in the exquisitely Fascist-era Museum of Roman Civilization (P. Aschieri, D. Bernardini, C. Pascoletti, 1939-41) at EUR.



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Construction equipment,  
Dives in Misericordioso Church, Tor Tre Teste  
(Richard Meier, 1996- )