DEPT. OF ARCHITECTURE

ROMAN RENOVATION

Can Richard Meier undo what Augustus and Mussolini wrought?

BY JOHN SEABROOK

Recent events at St. Peter's Square, in Rome, have demonstrated, among other things, the virtues of a piazza. Three million people entered Rome in the course of about five days, and almost all of them came to the piazza outside the basilica. Bernini, the piazza's main architect, conceived the square (which is actually oval) in the seventeenth century as a site of pilgrimage, although he might not have imagined what could happen when Christian zeal is combined with mass tourism. Nevertheless, apart from a few minor incidents, everyone in the square behaved. For the people waiting outside it, in a line to view Pope John Paul II's body which stretched for more than three miles, the arms of Bernini's great flanking colonnades were ahead, like a big stone hug ready to enfold pilgrims and sightseers alike at the end of their ordeal.

The line snaked across the Vittorio Emanuele II bridge, upriver along the eastern bank of the Tiber, and almost as far as another square, Piazza Augusto Imperatore. If St. Peter's Square is a model for all the good things a piazza can be, Piazza Augusto is an example of all the things that can go wrong. Instead of the generously open space of St. Peter's, there's a large pile of earth and rock blocking the middle of this piazza, which houses the tomb of Augustus, Rome's first emperor. Its ancient stones are covered with a ragged crown of cypress trees.

The base of this uncharacteristically neglected-looking ruin has been excavated down to Year Zero, the street level two millennia ago, which was eighteen feet lower than the urban surface today; the area around the base now serves mainly as a toilet for dogs. Above this pit, on two sides of the piazza are Fascist-style façades of buildings constructed under Mussolini. On a third side are two Baroque churches, attached to another thirties building, and on the fourth side is the monumental sculptural frieze known as the Ara Pacis, or Altar of Peace, an early masterpiece of Roman art which was dedicated by Augustus in 9 B.C. If you line it up right, you can fit two thousand years of architectural history and three great eras of Roman builders (the emperors, the Popes, and the Fascists) in a single snapshot.

However, while the individual structures are interesting, they don't work together. There's something wrong with the over-all scale of the square. A piazza can be intimate, like Piazza Mattei, in the Ghetto, which is just big enough to hold its delightful turtle fountain, or it can be expansive, like Piazza Venezia, where Mussolini staged his big rallies. But whether it serves as the site of an impromptu soccer game, a political demonstration, or a pilgrimage, a piazza must always function as a stage for acting out scenes from the drama of everyday life. On this level, Piazza Augusto fails completely. It is a *dente cariato*, a rotten tooth—an abscess in Rome's idea of its own perfection.

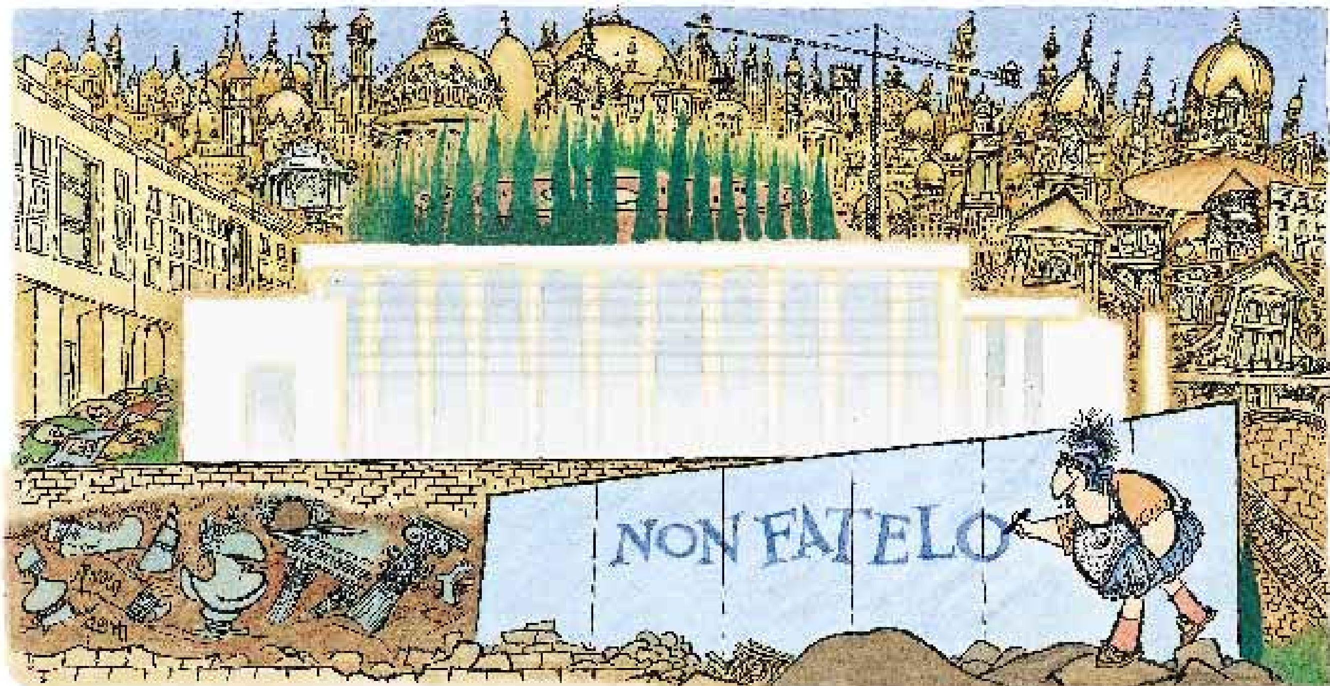
The story of Piazza Augusto Imperatore is a tale of how the city that invented civic architecture stopped creating it, except at its edges, where ugly postwar housing developments have spoiled the once famous *campagna romana*. It begins more than two thousand years ago, in the early days of the Roman Empire, with the construction of the mausoleum of Augustus, and it runs through Mussolini and his massive new architectural program for Rome with the piazza at its heart. Now it involves contemporary Roman politics, the celebrated American architect Richard Meier, and a fervid argument over the place of modern buildings in Rome.

In 1993, Rome elected as its mayor Francesco Rutelli, a thirty-nine-year-old star of the left, and, like many previous Roman leaders, he came to power with an itch to build. Rutelli's height, piercing green eyes, and American-style commu-

nication skills earned him the nickname Clintonino, or Little Clinton. He had a number of plans to rejuvenate the Eternal City. "I think cities are like languages," Rutelli told me. "If a language doesn't change, grow, and evolve, it dies. It is the same with cities—a city must be transformed from time to time."

One obvious means of effecting that transformation is to commission a dramatic new building. All the other major European cities have done this, from Daniel Libeskind's star-shaped Jewish Museum, in Berlin, to Richard Rogers's Millennium Dome, in London, and Richard Meier's Museum of Contemporary Art, in Barcelona. Even if people detest the building (the Dome, for example, was vilified by many Londoners), they talk about it, and the debate gives the city a youthful energy that the Colosseum and the Pantheon can't provide all by themselves.

Shortly after Rutelli was elected, he was invited by the mayor of Barcelona, Pasqual Maragall, to see Richard Meier's museum there, and he was enchanted by it. The following year, he met Meier, in Davos, Switzerland, at the World Economic Summit; both were participating in a seminar on the future of cities. Afterward, they spoke about the possibility of Meier's designing a new museum to house the Ara Pacis, on the west side of Piazza Augusto. Rutelli wanted the building ready for the Year 2000 celebrations, a major event in Rome, and he proposed that it would be partially funded by corporate sponsors, in this case a consortium of three banks that had supported other cultural activities in Rome. A time-consuming competition could be avoided; in fact, there would be no public review at all. As Rutelli put it, "It was perhaps a risk, but we wanted to avoid dragging the process out with too long a debate."



For many Romans, the reaction to Meier's design for a museum on the Piazza Augusto was simply "Non fatelo"—don't build it.

ARNOLD ROTH

Richard Meier was thrilled with Rutelli's offer. "It's every architect's dream to build in the center of Rome, partly because it hasn't been done for so long," he told me. Naturally, Meier also liked Rutelli's scheme for avoiding a competition. "It was an unusual situation," he said. "Normally, in projects of this kind, you go through a long jury process to select an architect. This was direct—and to me it seems like the best way."

Born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1934, Meier studied architecture at Cornell and made his name by designing residences, most notably the 1967 Smith House, in Darien, Connecticut, on Long Island Sound. Early in his career, Meier and four other architects, calling themselves the New York Five, proclaimed their allegiance to the ideas of Le Corbusier and the Northern European tradition of modernism. According to Le Corbusier, a building should take no account of its setting and context—the architect should be concerned only with the formal properties of the structure itself. Meier favored an industrial aesthetic that was rigorously minimalist, rejecting all ornamental flourishes except for those which can be achieved with white paint, glass, and light. Some of Meier's contemporaries, notably Michael Graves, later moved away from these tenets, but Meier has remained steadfastly Corbusian. Only the scale has changed, as he has progressed from houses to museums and government buildings. Despite the modernity of Meier's style, his buildings are deeply conservative.

In 1973, Meier spent a year at the American Academy in Rome, which is situated at the top of the Janiculum Hill, the highest point in central Rome. "Rome taught me how to treat large interior spaces in an intimate way," he said. "The way the light comes in, the way you experience the space, move through the space—that sense of promenade. You don't try to duplicate that, but you hope you learn from it. It's what every architect comes to Rome for, to learn that." One of Meier's favorite buildings in Rome is Sant' Ivo alla Sapienza, Borromini's church off Corso del Rinascimento, which is designed like a six-pointed star. "You can go to Sant' Ivo

when there are two people, and you can go there when there are a hundred people, and it still feels intimate."

Augustus was a sober, culturally conservative Roman; it's typical that one of his first great buildings was his tomb. At the time Augustus built his mausoleum, it was among the largest structures in early imperial Rome—an enormous round base of brick clad in gleaming white marble, on top of which sat a towering mound of earth that was planted with evergreens and cypresses, in the style of the Etruscan tombs. Work on it began soon after Augustus defeated Anthony and Cleopatra in the battle of Actium, in 31 B.C. As it turned out, Augustus didn't need his tomb for forty-two more years, and during that time he created many other monuments: temples, aqueducts, colonnades, theatres, roads, and bridges. These were not only buildings for the religious and political élite but also great architecture for the masses.

The Ara Pacis was commissioned in 13 B.C., to celebrate Augustus' return from three years of campaigning in Gaul and Spain, where he had been putting down rebellions and creating the administrative bureaucracy for the new empire. In form, the Ara resembles the kind of stone structures that earlier generations of Romans had built as places for offering sacrifices to the gods, except that it is much larger, and the carved friezes are among the great masterpieces of ancient sculpture. The four-sided outer-precinct walls are twenty-eight feet high, with marble steps leading up to the entrance. Inside, there is a carved marble altar. The sculptures on the southern precinct wall depict a religious procession, in which Augustus and members of his family are shown practicing rites which were part of Rome's republican past but had by then been laid aside. Augustus was trying to make the radical autocracy of the new empire acceptable to the Romans by combining it with old-fashioned values—keeping up appearances, respecting *mos maiorum* (the way the ancestors did things), and honoring the greatness of Rome.

When Augustus died, in 14 A.D., an ossuary containing his ashes was placed in a niche within the mausoleum; it remained there until it disappeared, probably during one of the barbarian sacks of Rome in the fifth century. Over the ensuing centuries, the tomb's marble was stripped off and employed for other buildings, and the mausoleum was used for a variety of purposes—as a bear-baiting venue, as a bullfighting arena, and, from 1908, as the site of Rome's main concert hall, which was built on top of the tomb.

In the twentieth century, the piazza became the centerpiece of Benito Mussolini's plans for Rome. Just before the Fascist Party took power, in 1922, Mussolini said, "Rome is our point of departure, our reference point. It is our symbol, or, if you will, our myth." He wanted Italians to see him as a second Augustus, and to see the Fascist empire, which he proclaimed after conquering Ethiopia in 1936, as the new Roman Empire. He used both new buildings and ancient ruins to make his case. "We must liber-

GLASGOW—PLEASE CENTER RULE BETWEEN TEXT ABOVE AND AD BELOW—IF AD IS OVERSIZED, PLEASE DROP AD DOWN TO FOLIO

ate all of ancient Rome from mediocre disfigurements," he said. "Rome cannot, must not simply be a modern city in the banal sense of the word."

Near the Colosseum, Mussolini demolished a whole neighborhood, razed a hill, and cut a wide, straight modern road between the Roman Forum and the Imperial Forums, the Via dei Fori Imperiali, so that crowds who gathered in Piazza Venezia to hear him thunder from his balcony about Italy's future could do so within thrilling sight of Italy's glorious past. Christopher Woodward, in his 2001 book, "In Ruins," observes that the remains of ancient Rome can have two opposing meanings—they can stand for the greatness of Rome, or for the passing of that greatness, and these interpretations have served Fascist and Christian ideologies, respectively. Mussolini took the decayed ruins that inspired artists and poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and turned them into the monumental ruins that delighted Hitler, when he visited Rome in 1938, and that continue to draw tourists from all over the world today.

Mussolini scooped Piazza Augusto out of the dense urban tissue of Rome. He demolished all the buildings within a thousand-square-yard area around the mausoleum of Augustus, leaving only the two Baroque churches standing. Two new buildings were added, to form the north and east sides of the piazza, each fronted by porticoes of squat, massive columns that recall Mussolini's pugnacious physiognomy. As with other Fascist works in Rome, the design was carried out by a committee of the leading Italian rationalist architects of the day, closely supervised by Il Duce himself. Rome's ancient architectural vernacular—domes, vaults, cylinders, prisms—was reinterpreted within the rationalists' interest in geometrical abstraction, resulting in buildings that were, at their best, modernist and classical at the same time. The design of Piazza Augusto, executed by a Jewish architect named Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo, originally called for buildings that were only two stories high, a scale that worked better with the other elements in the piazza. However, by the time the buildings were erected they had succumbed to the Fascist tendency to grandiosity, and swelled to four stories.

When the design for these buildings was finished, Mussolini added the ideological key to the whole piazza—the Ara Pacis. He had it moved from its site, near Via del Corso, where it was buried beneath a sixteenth-century palazzo, and ordered it placed between the mausoleum and the river. Just as Augustus used Rome's republican heritage to lend a sense of continuity to the imperial regime, which in fact represented the end of that heritage, so would Mussolini use Rome's Augustan past to make the Fascist state seem inevitable—patrimony as destiny.

Morpurgo designed a simple, shell-like building to house the Ara Pacis—a mostly glass, cement, and travertine structure—with a flight of travertine steps leading up to it. However, by 1938

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Hitler had forced the passage of the anti-Semitic Racial Laws, and Morpurgo was not permitted to remain in charge of the building. It was erected by a committee of engineers who loosely followed his design.

Some archeologists think that Mussolini planned to use Augustus' mausoleum as his own tomb. But when Mussolini was shot, by partisans, on April 28, 1945, his body was not interred in Piazza Augusto; instead, it was hung upside down outside a gas station in Milan, then buried in an unmarked grave, from which it was stolen by a Fascist loyalist, and then, after spending some time hidden in a monk's cell in a charterhouse outside Milan, it was eventually reinterred in Mussolini's home town of Predappio, in Emilia-Romagna, where the grave has become a popular tourist attraction. The piazza lost its status as prophecy and became, instead, a monumentally failed boast.

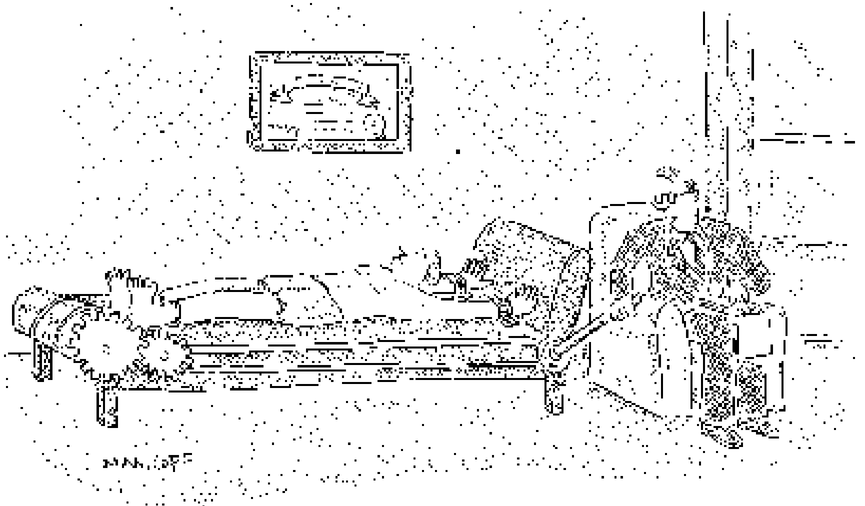
Meier worked on the drawings for the Ara Pacis project for eighteen months, designing the building with John Eisler, a senior architect at Richard Meier & Partners Architects in New York. He designs by hand, sketching with a 2B drafting pencil and giving finished drawings to his staff for digital rendering. Meier wanted something "light, transparent, and inviting," and also "optimistic," a word he often uses to characterize his own work and architecture in general. "I thought about the imposition Mussolini had made here," he said. "It's an imposition of a will on the environment—everything about it is huge. The columns are so massive that the colonnades read like all solids and no voids. It's out of scale with the rest of Rome, which has this very human scale."

In July, 1996, Meier made an elaborate presentation to city officials. His proposal looked a good deal like his museum in Barcelona. It featured a series of loggia-like structures organized around one wall—a single vertical plane that begins as an eight-foot wall at one end of the site and grows into the façade of the building. The Ara Pacis would be inside the middle loggia, surrounded by walls made of massive glass panels, each one weighing twelve hundred pounds. There was also room for a library, a bookstore, a café, and an auditorium capable of seating about a hundred and fifty people. Above the auditorium was a large round skylight, which looks like a reference to the oculus in the roof of the nearby Pantheon. It's not, Meier told me; he doesn't make historical references in his work. "It's a skylight, for letting light into the room." The total budget for the project was around twenty million dollars, a relatively modest sum, in part because Meier agreed to a fee that was consistent with the Italian pay scale for architects, which is well below what he is paid for his buildings in the United States and elsewhere.

Before construction began, the building had to be approved by the city's superintendent of cultural heritage and by two national superintendents, for archeology and for architecture. Every city has its battles between preservationists and developers, but in Rome the situation is greatly complicated by the fact that there are so many different Romes to preserve—classical Rome, medieval Rome, Renaissance Rome, Baroque Rome, eighteenth-century Rome, post-unification-of-Italy Rome, and Fascist Rome. Each successive Rome is built on top of (and in many cases out of) previous Romes—more than two thousand years of history is squashed into dozens of feet of dense rubble. (You can see these striations of civilization at the edges of some of the excavations around the city, and they look almost geological, so thoroughly have the building materials and artifacts been compacted.) This is Roma che Sparisce, or Vanishing Rome, the underground city that impinges on the surface city in countless ways, the Rome that Freud was thinking of when he famously used the city as a metaphor for the human unconscious in "Civilization and Its Discontents."

The office of superintendent dates from the Renaissance, when Rome was still a Papal state and the Church claimed control over all the ancient buildings and works of art in the city. Pope Leo X's superintendent was the painter Raphael. In the fifteen-tens, Raphael was "prefect of all marble and stone" within ten miles of the Vatican. Bernini was a superintendent for Pope Urban VIII, in the sixteen-thirties and forties. He removed the bronze beams that decorated the ceiling of the Pantheon's pronaos, melted them down, and turned them into his overwrought *baldacchino*, which towers over the high altar in St. Peter's Basilica.

Italy became a nation in 1861. Rome was annexed in 1870, and the Church was forced to surrender oversight of Rome's cultural heritage to the state. While ultimate control over the vast array of archeological and historical sites lies with the national authorities, their administration was confusingly divided between the state and the *comune*, or city government. The state claimed the Roman Forum and the Palatine Hill; the city took the Imperial Forums. The national superintendent of archeological heritage got control over buildings and artifacts that date from before 476, the official end of the western Roman Empire; the national superintendent of architectural heritage claimed buildings and artifacts created after 476;



"Look, you're never going to make any progress in therapy if you keep blaming other people for your problems."

and the city's superintendent of cultural heritage became responsible for the city's museums and works of art, as well as public gardens and fountains.

Since Mussolini's death, these superintendents have treated the *centro storico* as if it were finished. With so much restoration and excavation to be done, it didn't make sense to waste resources on new buildings. By the nineteen-eighties, this attitude dominated Roman city planning. "Archeologists have the attitude that there is nothing you can build in the center of Rome that could possibly be as interesting as what's already there, either on the ground or under the ground," Francesco Garofalo, an architect in Rome, told me. "They would rather leave a lot empty, in the hope of one day excavating it, than allow anything to be built. It's insane."

Many of Francesco Rutelli's attempts to modernize Rome were frustrated by the superintendent of archeological heritage, Adriano La Regina. In 1997, for example, La Regina stopped Rutelli from building a traffic tunnel under Castel Sant' Angelo, near the river. The tunnel would have solved one of the biggest traffic problems in central Rome—the moat of automobiles that rings the castle and cuts it off from the surrounding neighborhood of Prati. But La Regina said no to the tunnel, because he felt that he had not been given sufficient assurances that the stability of the building would be preserved by the engineers.

During his twenty-eight years as archeological superintendent, which ended in January, La Regina was probably the most influential city planner in Rome, although his influence can be measured mainly in absences—buildings not built, roads removed, acreage excavated. When I visited him in his office, in the Roman Forum, the greatest excavation site in the world, he looked ready for his approaching retirement. He seemed worn out by long years of defending Vanishing Rome from the forces of modernity. Raising his glasses and peering closely at a map of the Roman Forum and the Imperial Forums from 1981, he pointed with pride to the parks in the Imperial Forums that he had turned into excavations and to another spot, just below the Capitoline Hill, where a modern road used to run. "You know in the film 'Roman Holiday,' when Gregory Peck takes the road on his scooter?" he asked. "We removed it." It was the only time during our interview that I saw him smile.

When I asked whether he thought he had been too aggressive in protecting Rome's archeological past, citing the frequently heard complaint that Rome has become a museum of the once great city it was, La Regina disagreed. "As proof, you only have to look at all the tourists who come to Rome to see that past," he said. The problem, he went on, is with politicians like Rutelli. Politicians need new roads and construction projects, because such projects employ potential voters and spread money around. "It is our duty to say no, when there is a danger to archeological monuments, but it becomes very difficult when you deal with politicians. Because while tourists bring a lot of money to the city, they don't vote—so there will almost always be a conflict there."

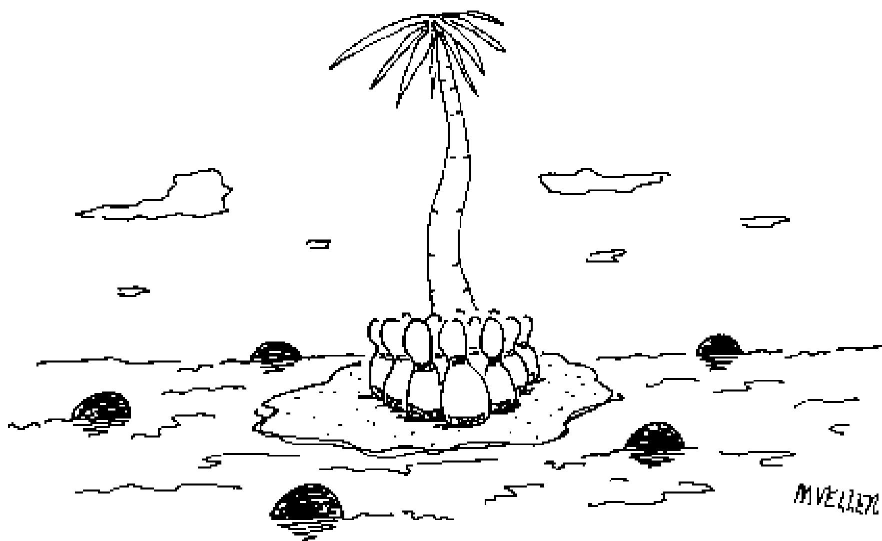
In the late nineteen-nineties, after giving his initial consent to Meier's building, La Regina took core samples around the site and found some limited evidence of ancient structures. The superintendent took more than two years to study these findings. In 2000, he finally gave his approval for work to proceed, although he reserved the right to do further excavations after the Morpurgo building came down. In 2001, he again stopped work, in order to excavate on the south and north sides of the site. The contractor, Fabrizio Di Amato, demanded that the city pay for the cost of equipment and workers who were now idle. Meanwhile, the superintendent of cultural heritage for the city of Rome, Dr. Eugenio La Rocca, had determined that the Ara Pacis was too fragile to move; the Meier museum would have to be built around it. The monument was packed up in protective plywood and scaffolding tubes. It wasn't until 2001, a year after the new museum was supposed to have been finished, that Morpurgo's building was demolished.

By this time, Rutelli was no longer mayor. He had decided to forgo the last months of his second term, in order to lead the center-left coalition against the center-right's leader, Silvio Berlusconi, in Italy's 2001 general election for prime minister. But the contest, which the press called "*il bello contro il ricco*," the handsome guy against the rich guy, wasn't a contest at all—the rich guy won overwhelmingly. Another man of the left, Walter Veltroni, became mayor of Rome. He let it be known that he was in favor of Meier's building, but he did not have the same personal involvement in the project that Rutelli had had, and did not make its completion a priority.

With the Berlusconi government in power, the antagonists of the Meier project found a friend in Vittorio Sgarbi, the new under-secretary to the Minister of Culture. Sgarbi is a conservative art critic who became a national figure in the nineteen-eighties as a frequent guest on a popular television show that was a cross between Charlie Rose and Jerry Springer. It featured Sgarbi's erudite discussions of matters of culture combined with outrageous personal attacks on other guests; Sgarbi delighted audiences by living up to the meaning of his name—"*sgarbato*" means "uncivil." On at least one occasion he came to blows with his fellow guests on national television. In the nineties, he had his own show, "Sgarbi Quotidiani," or "Daily Sgarbi," a monologue on current events and culture.

Sgarbi managed to present Meier's building as an example of Italy's careless attitude toward its heritage. An ambitious leftist politician and an arrogant world-famous architect were advancing their own agendas, without public review. "In America, you could never allow the mayor of New York and Richard Meier to build around the Statue of Liberty, let's say, without at least a public review," Sgarbi told me, when I went to the apartment where he was residing, which once belonged to Pope Innocent X and overlooks the Piazza Navona. "Only in Italy do we allow this."

Sgarbi also had a number of uncivil things to say about the appearance of Meier's building, describing it as "disgusting," and calling attention to how incongruous the blindingly white, industrial-looking building would seem among Rome's peachy neoclassical façades. "It looks more like a gas station in Dallas than a museum in Rome," he said. And Meier, after all, was not solving any of the central problems of the



dente cariato; he was merely applying a glossy white modernist cap.

But with the old Morpurgo building already gone, and the scaffolding for the Meier building under construction, Sgarbi's options for stopping the project were limited. According to Meier, Sgarbi came to see him and begged him to change some part of the project, so that he could save face in Italy, but Meier refused. Sgarbi then demanded that the city excavate for an eighteenth-century piece of Roma che Sparisce, the Port of Ripetta, which was once situated under the southwestern end of the site. The port was a kind of amphibious piazza that featured graceful travertine steps leading down into the water; the steps were designed by the architect responsible for the Spanish Steps, Alessandro Specchi. The travertine had almost certainly been removed when the forty-foot walls along the Tiber were built, in the eighteen-seventies, and, in any case, the Lungotevere, the city's main north-south traffic artery, was now on top of it. Nevertheless, Superintendent La Rocca eventually agreed to undertake additional excavations. The negotiations delayed construction another year.

These excavations, La Rocca told me when I went to see him at his office, in Piazza Lovatelli, in the Ghetto, "determined that there was hardly anything left of the port down below." But, just in case, the superintendents had already asked Meier to eliminate part of the aesthetically crucial wall, and to change the foundations of the building so as not to impinge on any possible remains. (The building now balances on a poured-concrete raft.) "So that in the future," La Rocca went on, "if anyone does want to go down and reopen the Port of Ripetta, they will be able to."

Thanks, in part, to Sgarbi's efforts, by 2002 the Meier building had become an international symbol of the shortcomings of modernism. Meier may have seen his building as a humanist antidote to the totalitarian architecture in the piazza, but to its critics the building represented a different kind of Fascism—the globalization of the International Style, which has littered the great capitals of Europe with its cold boxes. Marc Breitman, a well-known French architect, feared that the Meier building could be "a Pandora's box" for a modernist takeover of the historic center of Rome, raising the alarming prospect of Gehry-style blobs following Meier's white boxes. Léon Krier, of Luxembourg, commented, "The municipality's decision to rebuild the enclosure around the Ara Pacis in a modernist style, which is willfully anti-classical, is an act of provocation of extreme gravity." In 2002, Samir Younés, the director of the Rome Studies program at the University of Notre Dame's architecture school, published a book of counterproposals for the site, which also contained many of the arguments against the building. Younés told me, "A building should take account of the sense of place. What I object to about the Meier building is that it is a type of industrial architecture that could be in Barcelona—indeed, it looks a good deal like the Meier building in Barcelona—or Atlanta or Athens; it completely denies the sense of place."

Terence Riley, the chief curator of architecture and design for the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, argues that Meier was a good choice for Rome. "Of all the well-known contemporary architects, Meier is probably the most classical, in the sense of proportion, and in his sympathy with urban fabric," he said. "Roman architecture has been exported to virtually every corner of the globe—the neoclassical style is the vernacular for almost all important civic, ecclesiastical, or commercial buildings from Shanghai to New York—and to erect barriers that prevent the flow of style from moving the other way seems capricious." He added, "I think the attempt to create a kind of urban taxidermy in Rome is unnatural."

By the beginning of 2003, it appeared as if the project might remain entangled in bureaucratic spaghetti forever. The contractor, Di Amato, was still losing money, and was threatening to make the superintendents pay. Meier was busy with other buildings, among them the Jubilee Church on the outskirts of Rome (though Meier's church was commissioned after his museum, the Vatican had proved to be a considerably more pliable client than the *comune*, and the church was nearing completion); the museum for the Burda Collection, in Baden-Baden; and condominiums on Perry Street, in Manhattan's West Village. Romans were frescoing the construction walls around the Ara Pacis site with graffiti.

Meanwhile, a meeting had been arranged for all three superintendents and some outside experts to discuss the future of the piazza. Meier's project manager, Nigel Ryan, and the contractor attended the meeting as unofficial observers. La Regina also invited Leonardo Benevolo, the author of "The History of the City" and one of the most influential postwar Italian *urbanisti;* in his 1977 book "Roma Oggi," Benevolo, a radical conservative, advocated destroying most post-1870 buildings in the *centro storico* and replacing them with parks. The meeting took place in the executive construction trailer on the site, around a large table. A scale model of the Ara Pacis museum, made by local architecture students, was in the center of the table. Someone had placed miniature human figures inside the model, to give it a sense of scale; oddly, the figures were dressed in eighteenth-century clothing.

Stephen Natanson, a filmmaker who has made a documentary about Meier's Ara Pacis project for Italian television, recorded the proceedings on film.

Shortly after the meeting began, the superintendent of architectural heritage, Roberto Di Paola, said that he wasn't satisfied with the Port of Ripetta excavations, and suggested that the whole piazza be dug down to Year Zero. Benevolo enthusiastically endorsed Di Paola's notion, and recommended tearing down the Fascist buildings, too; he had brought along sketches showing the piazza without them. La Regina seemed reluctant to back Di Paola in continuing the dig, in part because Di Paola had always refused to allow La Regina to excavate some gardens under his authority in the Imperial Forums. The contractor then said that if the *comune* really wished to stop the project and dig a big hole, the *comune* was going to have to reimburse him for all the money he would lose. This diminished Di Paola's enthusiasm for the monumental pit, and the meeting broke up shortly afterward with an informal agreement to allow the work to proceed. Two months later, the new foundation was poured.

One hot morning last summer, Richard Meier came to Piazza Augusto Imperatore. He toured the construction site with Superintendent La Rocca. Construction was far from finished: only the steel frame and concrete floors were in place. Without the interiors, the structure looked like a big-box store. The two men walked amid the scaffolding and piles of rebar, in the heat and dust, trailed by a crowd of builders, suppliers, designers, and journalists. Meier endured the attention with an air of noblesse oblige, but La Rocca became irritated by the scene. When one paparazzo elbowed him aside to get a picture of *il maestro* inspecting a sample "Fire Exit" sign, La Rocca cried, "*Non è possibile!*"

La Rocca was eager to see the view of the piazza from the roof of the museum; he had not been up there before. But getting to the roof required climbing three and a half flights of construction ladders and squeezing through the narrow openings at the top of each one. Meier is seventy and favors his right side when he walks. His snow-white, Yeatsian-length hair gives him the saintly mien of an artist in his master years. He had flown to Rome the night before from Moscow, where he had been meeting with a potential client, and he was flying back to New York that afternoon. Climbing construction ladders in the terrible heat was probably not at the top of his list of things to do in Rome. He couldn't squeeze his broad shoulders through the openings at the top of each ladder without twisting sideways. After the first ladder, he removed his double-breasted gray suit jacket. By the time he reached the third ladder his white shirt was splotched with sweat and his black wingtips were pale with construction dust.

"You've got to be in shape to be an architect," he said, pausing to catch his breath.

Emerging finally on the roof, Meier looked at the mausoleum and the surrounding square, with its two thousand years of building. Overgrown and unkempt, Augustus' tomb looked more like a symbol of Rome's transience than of its lasting greatness. "Rome reminds me of a man who lives by exhibiting to travellers his grandmother's corpse," James Joyce remarked, in a letter to his brother, and one gets this feeling looking at Augustus' tomb. It represents the futility of architecture to stave off the inevitable ruination of all things.

As for the piazza, it is no closer to being a functional public space than it was before Meier's building began going up. When he first got the commission, Meier wanted it to include the whole piazza, but he no longer felt that way. He wasn't sure what to do about the piazza, although he thought the solution might have to be radical. "Maybe you just cut it all down to street level and start again," he told me.

La Rocca moved toward the shade below; already the ladders were hot to the touch. But the architect, bareheaded in the sun, continued to stare out at the forlorn piazza. Finally, Meier started down the ladders, his legs trembling slightly on the rungs.

At the bottom, the client and the architect went over to look at the Ara Pacis. It was still boxed up, with the building going up all around it, poised between being a wreck, a ruin, and the rebirth of Rome. Four massive poured-concrete columns framed the plywood box.

La Rocca seemed overjoyed with the prospect. "It is as it was," he said in a solemn whisper.

"It will be," Meier agreed. ♦