

Log

SUMMER/FALL 2007

Observations on architecture and the contemporary city

<i>Kunlé Adeyemi</i>	45	Urban Crawl
<i>Giorgio Agamben</i>	23	In Praise of Profanation
<i>Matthew Allen</i>	5	Speculative Sensationalists
<i>Shumon Basar</i>	9	Over the Top and Under the Influence
<i>Mario Carpo</i>	19	Sustainable?
<i>Tomislav Čeranić</i>	152	<i>Star City</i>
<i>Elizabeth Diller</i>	49	Two Thoughts
<i>Sanford Kwinter</i>	41	Notes on Abominable Things
<i>Greg Lynn</i>	55	Machine Language
<i>Peter Macapia</i>	137	Dirty Geometry
<i>Gabriele Mastrigli</i>	71	Manipulations, or, Rethinking Tabula Rasa
<i>Alex McDowell</i>	65	The Architecture of Performance
<i>Farshid Moussavi</i>	81	Hybrid Identities: Mutating Type
<i>Michelle Murphy</i>	109	Exposed on the Inside
<i>R&Sie(n) +D</i>	115	I've heard about . . . (a flat, fat, growing urban experiment)
<i>Paulette Singley</i>	129	Roma Macchiata: The Stain of White
<i>Peter Sloterdijk</i>	89	Cell Block, Egospheres, Self-Container

General Observations:

On David Adjaye 18 . . . On the Eruv 48 . . . On Fast Food in Paradise 80 . . . On Flatware 22 . . . On Governors Island 64 . . . On Mecca 88 . . . On PS1 54 . . . On Woolly Mammoths 70 . . .

Cover Story:

Text and *Techno-pastoral Sublime* by Michelangelo Sabatino.

Roma Macchiata: The Stain of White



BERNARDO BERTOLUCCI, *IL CONFORMISTA (THE CONFORMIST)*, 1970. IMAGES COURTESY THE AUTHOR.

Early on in Bernardo Bertolucci's 1970 antifascist film *Il Conformista (The Conformist)*, the main character, dressed in a suit, walks alongside a retaining wall inscribed with the words from *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, Emperor Augustus's list of achievements while princeps of the Roman Empire. The wall is part of the Piazza Augusto Imperatore, which surrounds the Mausoleum of Augustus, a ruin in the Campo Marzio, alongside Via di Ripetta, which runs parallel to the Tiber River. In 1936, during the height of Italian fascism, excavation of the mausoleum and the concomitant relocation of the emperor's Ara Pacis, or Altar of Peace, were completed according to Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo's design.¹ This included liberating the mausoleum from attached inhabitation, building new palazzi to enclose a new piazza, and constructing a retaining wall to support the plaza upon which Morpurgo built a new pavilion to house the restored Ara Pacis. This iconographic program, intended to posit Mussolini as the new Augustus, is still explicitly spelled out on the façades of the 1930s palazzi featuring "images of shepherd boys tending their flocks, robust peasant mothers dangling fascist babies," and "young girls carrying baskets of fruit or husks of grain."² In scripting this ancient site according to their own political rhetoric, the fascists attempted to laminate their illegitimate regime with the glory of a former dictator who had achieved a sustained peace and transformed Rome from a city of brick to one of marble. This history of the Ara Pacis Museum site was the political and historical stage onto which Richard Meier entered in 1995 and from which his controversial, yet ultimately conformist, museum finally emerged 11 years later.

In his essay "The Emperor and the Duce: The Planning of Piazzale Augusto Imperatore in Rome," Spiro Kostof thoroughly outlines the history of fascist interventions on the site: "To Mussolini ancient Rome meant Imperial Rome and Imperial Rome was encapsulated in the name of Augustus."³ The fascist planners and archaeologists developed a precise vocabulary for their transformations of the post-*Risorgimento* (unification) city into the Third Rome with terms such as *isolamento* (isolation), *diradamento* (pruning), *valorizzazione*

1. Stefano Casiani clarifies: "Conventionally attributed to the architect Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo, the project was actually the work of Rome's city council's technical department, taking their cue from Morpurgo's original design which his Jewish origins prevented him from executing while the racial laws promulgated by Fascism were in operation in Italy." (*Domus*, November 2001) as cited in *Richard Meier Architect* (New York: Rizzoli, 2004), 419.

2. Spiro Kostof, "The Emperor and the Duce: The Planning of Piazzale Augusto Imperatore in Rome," in *Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics*, ed. Henry A. Millon and Linda Nochlin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978), 309.

3. Kostof, "The Emperor and the Duce," 309.

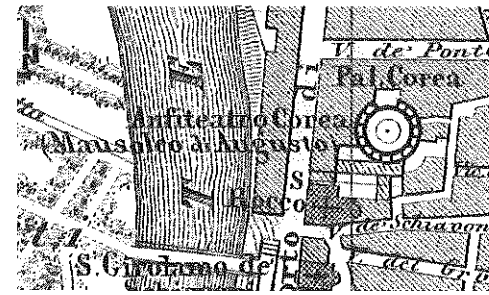
(optimum visibility), and *sventramento* (disemboweling), all of which occurred at this site. Before the fascist interventions, the Mausoleum of Augustus was a functioning space, and as depicted in the Nolli plan of 1748, completely engulfed by layers of inhabitation, and in continual use since the Middle Ages. As Kostof describes:

It had been a fort of the Colonna and the Orsini; laid out as a hanging garden by Soderini who had acquired it in 1546; transformed into a bullring in the eighteenth century; taken over by the State in the late nineteenth century, and occupied for some years by the sculptor Enrico Chiaradia as a work-space for his equestrian of the Vittoriano; and finally ceded to the city in 1907, which had remodeled it as a concert hall.⁴ The mausoleum was an interior space surrounded by buildings, not an empty object sunken into a banal piazza.

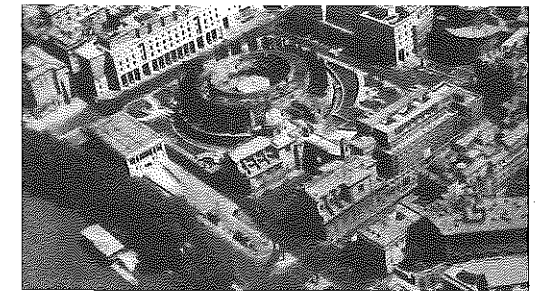
When Mussolini inaugurated the groundbreaking of the Piazza Augusto Imperatore on October 22, 1934, he initiated the eventual demolition of six streets and 127 houses in an area covering 27,000 square meters.⁵ The mausoleum was “disemboweled” of its concert hall, “pruned” of the buildings that surrounded it, “isolated” in an empty piazza, and “valorized” by the surrounding palazzi and urban set design created for relocating the Ara Pacis. Much of the campaign to build the piazza had begun with the discovery of new fragments of the Ara Pacis on the west side of Via Flaminia, underneath the Palazzo Fiano. After falling into ruin, various pieces of the altar had been displaced to museums in Rome, Florence, Paris, and Vienna. Innovative archaeological processes were developed to excavate the buried pieces, and their reunification into a new whole became the crown jewel of the piazza.

The Ara Pacis originally stood next to the Horologium Augusti, the 160-by-75-meter sundial formed of inscribed pavement and a 30-meter-high, red granite obelisk, or gnomon, that cast shadows to mark the time. Together they formed part of a sacred urban composition in the Campo Marzio. On Augustus’s birthday, September 23 (often the date of the fall equinox), “the obelisk of the Horologium cast a long shadowy finger directly through the door of the Ara Pacis and onto the interior altar.”⁶

Mussolini’s architectural imperatives were not all as clear as the aforementioned planning dictates. During the 1920s and ’30s in Italy a heated debate continued over what style of architecture the fascist party should endorse. Should it be the historicist language of the Palazzo del lavoro e civiltà (the “square coliseum” at E.U.R.) or should it be the modernism of the Florence train station? Would Mussolini favor Ugo



MAP FROM BAEDEKER'S *ROME*, 1930. DETAIL OF AREA SURROUNDING THE MAUSOLEUM OF AUGUSTUS (LEFT). AERIAL VIEW OF THE PIAZZA AUGUSTO IMPERATORE AFTER MORPURGO'S RECONSTRUCTION, INAUGURATED SEPTEMBER 1938 (RIGHT).



Ogetti’s arches and columns or F. T. Marinetti’s futurism? The buildings surrounding the Mausoleum of Augustus affect this debate, with Renaissance-inspired palazzi forming two sides of the piazza and Morpurgo’s glass box housing the Ara Pacis forming a third, all of them clearly designed and constructed at the same time.

Given this highly politicized and sensitive landscape of history, urban context, and uniquely Italian politics, Meier’s Ara Pacis Museum is admirable if only for the remarkable fact that it is the first new building in the *centro storico* since the fall of fascism on July 25, 1943. Perhaps the single most important challenge Meier faced was contending with the expectations for a design solution that would address the 60-year-long vacuum of building in a city with one of the world’s most dense architectural legacies. If this project merits negative criticism for Meier’s reluctance to work with Rome’s colors and historical urban fabric, then it also merits praise for his ability to refer to the controversial language of modernism that preceded him in Rome and for his subtle compositional references to the site. The Morpurgo museum, too, is a part of Rome’s historical fabric, and it enters Meier’s project as part of a larger urban collage.

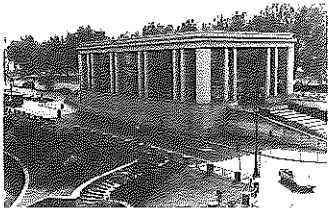
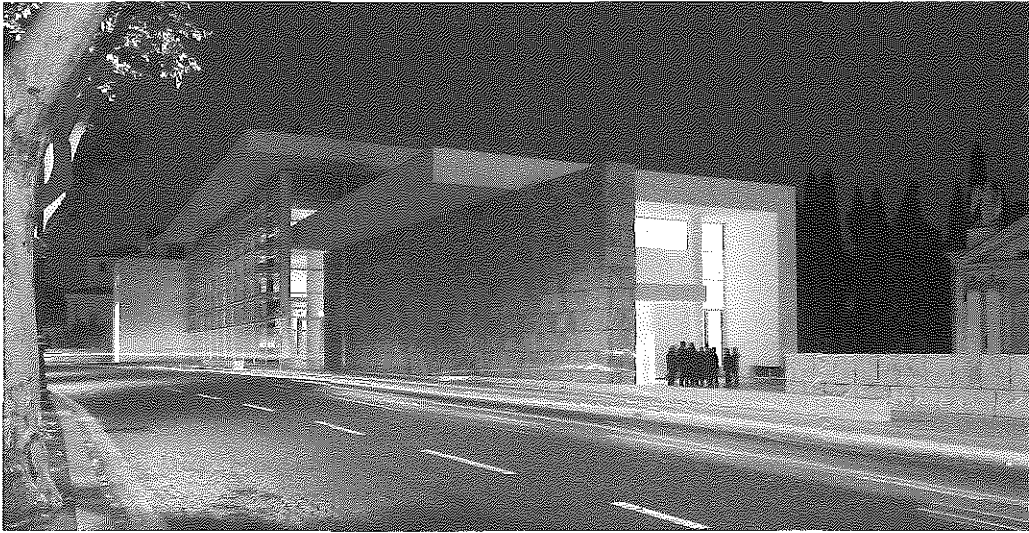
Any project to be built in this area, where archaeologists, art historians, architects, and urban planners heatedly debate what should happen, necessarily garners controversy. The direct commissioning of Meier to design the building, thereby circumventing the usual public design competition, increased the tension surrounding the project. But perhaps most important in the current global building boom, which has seen innovative material technologies, experimental modes of digital design or fabrication, and a willingness to probe formerly taboo subjects such as ornament, the selection of Meier, a designer known for staying a course that he has been perfecting since the Smith residence, was a tame choice. As Steve Rose of *The Guardian* writes:

When it comes to high-profile public architecture, Richard Meier is about as safe a pair of hands as you could hope for. Where con-

4. Spiro Kostof, *The Third Rome: 1870–1950 Traffic and Glory* (Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1973), 68.

5. Kostof, “The Emperor and the Duce,” 270–72.

6. Diane Favro, *The Urban Image of Augustan Rome* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 264.



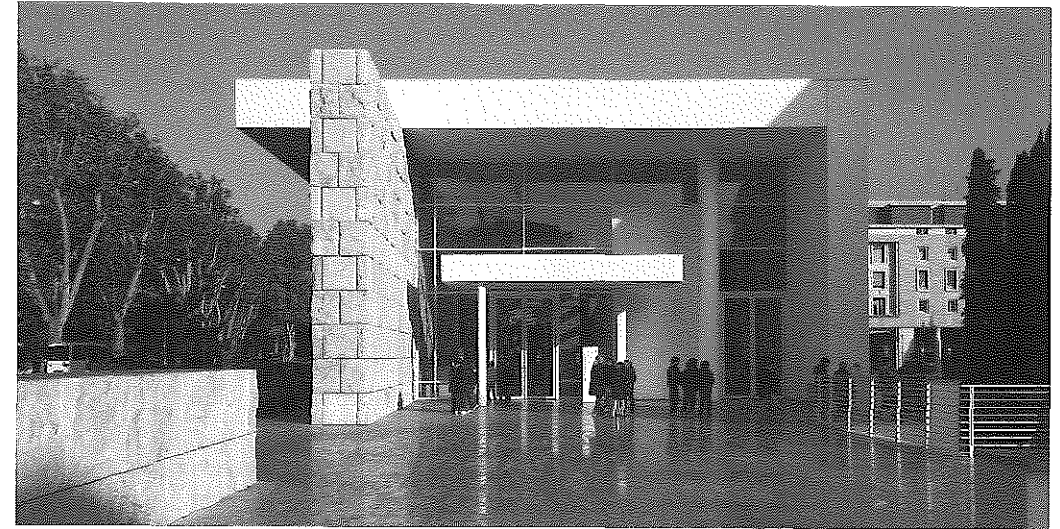
RICHARD MEIER & ASSOCIATES, THE ARA PACIS MUSEUM, 1995–2006 (TOP AND OPPOSITE); VITTORIO BALLIO MORPURGO, PIAZZA AUGUSTO IMPERATORE, 1938 (BOTTOM). MEIER PHOTOS: © THOMAS MAYER ARCHIVE, 2006.

temporary architects have explored more challenging realms of visual and spatial form, Meier represents the old school. He may once have been part of the New York Five, grouped with radicals such as Peter Eisenman and Michael Graves, but his work is directly linked to the purism of the original European modernists such as Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus (he worked for Marcel Breuer as a young man).⁷

As an architect who could design an aesthetically pleasing yet highly predictable solution to a problem, Meier played the conformist in an urban drama, producing the conventional. Despite the opportunity to build in this culturally rich and politically contentious setting, like Bertolucci's conformist, Meier tries to negotiate normalcy. In his striving for a humanist design solution for a politically volatile site, he ultimately pays attention to the kind of "correct" behavior that characterizes the fascist architecture he was asked to replace.

Meier's office received a program that expanded the project from a small enclosing pavilion to a building that now houses a bookstore, a 150-seat theater, offices, a roof terrace, support spaces, a café, and toilets – a total of 4,250 square meters (approximately 45,750 square feet) of enclosed space. This increased size presented another design challenge, since the expanded program forced a much larger and more opaque silhouette onto the site than had previously occupied it. Proportionally, Meier breaks the building's large masses into smaller volumes that relate to the existing context and frame views of the river and nearby churches of San Rocco and San Girolamo degli Schiavoni. While the building dwarfs the mausoleum, it would be difficult not to eclipse this ancient artifact, gutted long ago by fascist planners.

7. Steve Rose, "When in Rome..." *The Guardian*, May 1, 2006.



The precedent of fascist urban design also offers terms with which to assess Meier's project urbanistically. In opposition to the practice of *isolamento*, the new freestanding wall forming the museum's entrance piazza gestures outward, across the length of the site, to address the neighboring churches. Similarly, the large cantilevered roof gestures to the river, while the telescoping entrance façade – white boxes within boxes – echoes the travertine surrounds that enclose the punched windows of the fascist palazzi to the north. The wall is composed of rough-hewn stone that contains fossil debris and imperfections, introducing its own archaeological relics to the site. It suggests ambivalent readings insofar as it offers a Janus-faced response to the site. The west-facing Tiber River façade and the south-facing entrance façade present stratified layers that recount Rome's historical fabric. The façade facing east, toward the Mausoleum of Augustus, and the north façade offer the city large, blank, white stucco walls. The front elevations work with the context but the rear elevations reject it; two sides develop an argument of accretion and addition, with freestanding walls that reference ruins such as fragments of the republican wall at the Stazione Termini, while the other two present modernist, anonymous, and contextless faces to the piazza. Thus the museum both engages and denies its context of fascist modernism and Rome's urban fabric.

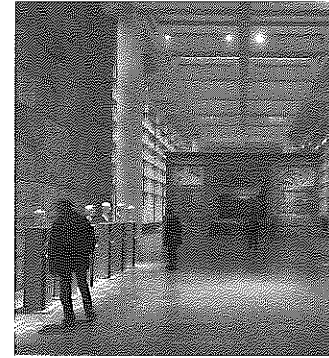
History proves to be a powerful force on not only an urban scale but architecturally as well. Meier adopts the north/south alignment of the Morpurgo building, parallel to the Tiber, but his museum resists the object building quality of Morpurgo's precedent, even as it references its steel and

glass curtain walls. And while Meier reenacted, so to speak, the *sventramento* of the previous Ara Pacis museum, his building remains an autonomous, modernist box at a remove from its context. Meier's design excels in referring as much to the modernism of Morpurgo's project as it does to the historically contrived palazzi across the street. The striking similarity between the curtain wall section of Meier's building and Morpurgo's demolished pavilion suggests more than mere formal affiliation. It also suggests a sensitivity that references Italy's racial laws, which prohibited Jews from participating in the building process, forcing the Jewish Morpurgo off the project before its completion. The new museum even reads as an addition to the Morpurgo project, because the broken-down scale of its masses begins to suggest a building that has accreted over time. Meier's project elegantly suspends the tension between the modern and more historicist buildings built in the '30s. But where he gestures toward the site, to Roman archaeology, and even to Italy's tradition of modernism, the more determined reading is that of a modernist box. Meier's modernism eclipses his contextualism; he stains the city with an architectural language reminiscent of fascism.

This stain comes from the material presence of the building more than anything else, as the whiteness of Meier's building stands out as "eugenically clean" architecture against its historic surroundings. This appearance oscillates between a critique and an endorsement of its fascist context – a sanitized figure inserted into a field sullied by fascism, but also a figure that refers to its fascist predecessor and stains the city of Rome with this parallelism. Use of the phrase "eugenically clean" is not overdetermined here. Along with the fascist desire to build the Third Rome (the unification of the imperial and Christian eras into fascism) was a political rhetoric regarding the act of removing potentially dangerous populations that inhabited the areas selected for urban renewal. Mussolini's urban eugenics successfully extracted dead monuments from a living city and, in so doing, demolished substantial and viable quarters of housing for the urban poor, who were displaced to "healthful" *borgate* (suburbs) on the periphery of Rome.⁸ The project's whiteness intensifies memories of the cleansing that the fascists completed in this area.

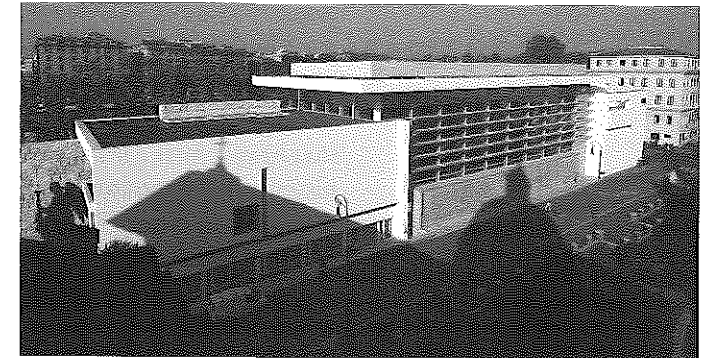
It is this stark contrast that generated so much controversy during the project's construction and that continues to produce debate and criticism after the museum's completion. One position, which John Seabrook observes in his *New*

8. See Ferruccio Trabalzi, "Low-Cost Housing in Twentieth Century Rome," in *Out of Site: A Social Criticism of Architecture*, ed. Diane Ghirardo (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 137. "Thus Rome's housing stock suffered exogenous pressures by virtue of the removal of the lower classes from the historic center, and endogenous pressures with the arrival of rural Italians from the countryside. The so-called *villaggi abissini* (a late-thirties term for shantytowns) were intolerable eyesores to the new fascist state and were also seen as potential sites of political unrest....The guiding ideas for low-income housing has two fundamental principles: one was to avoid settlements typically seen as lower-class within the walls of Rome; the other was to prevent the lower classes from coming in sufficient contact with one another to perceive themselves as a class and thereby risk the formation of political groups."



RICHARD MEIER & ASSOCIATES, THE ARA PACIS MUSEUM, 1995-2006. PHOTOS: © THOMAS MAYER ARCHIVE, 2006.

9. John Seabrook, "Roman Renovation: Can Richard Meier Undo what Augustus and Mussolini Wrought?," *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2005, 62.
10. Nicolai Ouroussoff, "An Oracle of Modernism in Ancient Rome," *New York Times*, September 25, 2006.



Yorker article on the project, is that Meier attempts to offer 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."⁹ Seabrook implicitly critiques Rome, in comparison with other European cities, as a place that finds it difficult to incorporate or accept new construction. Most of the new construction that Rome is witnessing – Massimiliano Fuksas's Congress Center at E.U.R., Zaha Hadid's Center for Contemporary Arts, Renzo Piano's Parco della Musica Auditorium, Meier's Jubilee Church – have been built on the city's periphery. Their relative success or failure relies less on contending with the pressures of Rome's historical fabric and more with engaging the architects' formal and technological vocabularies.

Since the museum opened on April 21, 2006, the date of Rome's annually celebrated birthday, reviews have been harsh, with *New York Times* critic Nicolai Ouroussoff, in particular, proclaiming "the building is a flop," "as clueless as its Fascist predecessors."¹⁰ But Ouroussoff is too glib and his criticism too easy. Having successfully animated this area of Rome with new architecture and a highly used public space, the building is not a "flop." More importantly, even if their planning policies were destructive, the architecture of Italian fascism (particularly in this piazza) is hardly "clueless." The competition to design the piazza and the space as finally realized in the 1930s exemplifies a serious attempt to balance modernist form-making with Rome's context, and certain moves, like the curving of the Via dei Pontifici, the bridge connecting San Rocco and San Girolamo degli Schiavoni, and the stylistic contrast with Morpurgo's building demonstrate the success of such an approach.

The new museum also provides a much needed intervention into the stubbornly historicist city center. For tourists in

Rome longing to see something built in the historic core after 1943, this project is a welcome remedy to the "ruin fatigue" that may accompany visitors throughout the city. The interior, washed with natural light and featuring floating walls that hover above gaps in the floor, is a satisfying and even a historically layered museum experience. If the building's large size, in comparison to its predecessor, and its glaring whiteness (the only other building in Rome this bright is the Monument to Victor Emmanuel II) offend the eye in a city of carved marble details and warm amber hues, this criticism eschews the more challenging questions of how the project does or does not work at ideological or formal levels.

What disappoints about the project is not its large size, its brightness, the façade facing the Mausoleum of Augustus, or even the fascist references; indeed, these references are the project's critical moment. Rather, what disappoints is also what makes the project a success. Certainly the newness of the Ara Pacis Museum, its exacting contrast with Rome's yellows and oranges, and its formal freshness are welcome qualities desperately needed in a city that has been embalming itself in its own archaeology for the past 60 years. And yet, it is safe, it is conservative, it conforms to the expectations of what a well-honed, contextual modernism can achieve. It also conforms to what we would expect from Meier as another addition to his own private museum of white, or nearly white, gridded boxes – a kind of obsessive-compulsive adherence to a formal itch that he still has not managed to stop himself from scratching.

Not an architect to radically experiment with provocative polemics, Meier has become the expert designer of museums, providing compelling experience in lighting and in sculpting spaces that feature the artworks they are intended to house. But, likewise, he has become an architect of conformism, perfectly Augustan in his conservative and sober demeanor. The museum, in other words, wears the conformist's business suit.

Perhaps over time the building will gain a little bit of the "rot" that Bernard Tschumi finds in "eroticism" and develop a Roman patina. We can imagine mold growing in the shadows that receive no sun, exhaust fumes blackening its white walls, glass that has not been cleaned, and graffiti sprayed over its clean exterior – the patina of Rome recontextualizing the building into something grown from the city, something grown from time.

PAULETTE SINGLEY IS ASSOCIATE
PROFESSOR OF ARCHITECTURE AT
WOODBURY UNIVERSITY AND IN THE
DEPARTMENT OF ARTS AND
SCIENCES AT ART CENTER COLLEGE
OF DESIGN IN PASADENA.