

# Tumultuous Transformations: Piazza Augusto Imperatore

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## From *Augusto* to *Oggi*

### The vicissitudes of an urban space

This paper will examine the vicissitudes of an urban space, the Piazza Augusto Imperatore which in a microcosm illustrate the vicissitudes of much of Rome over the centuries. I will be pointing out that because of the heavy handedness of architectural interventions, as opposed to the more casual organic process of accretion which characterizes Rome, Piazza Augusto Imperatore is one of the eternal city's least "Roman" public spaces.

### Campus Martius

Our site lies along the Tiber river in what was, in antiquity, the Campus Martius (campus for "field", martius for "mars, god of war" as military exercises took place here). Its legendary origins point to agricultural use under the Etruscan kings; with the expulsion of the Tarquins in 509 BCE the fields were uprooted and grain thrown into Tiber to form the Tiber island. Though there is no truth in the latter part, it is likely that around 500 BC Campus Martius was transformed from agricultural to urban use. Subject to flooding due to its low elevation and proximity to the Tiber, the Campus Martius was unsuitable for residential use, unlike the seven hills, but instead lent itself to monumental development. Its main axis was the Via Flaminia, leaving the city through Porta Fontinalis and Porta Flaminia to continue northward through the peninsula. The southern part of the Campus Martius would be more densely built up, from the early Republic, but the northern zone that I'm focusing on won't see much construction until the time of Augustus.

### Res Gestae Divi Augusti

You probably have all heard the quote that Augustus "found a city of brick and left a city of marble". This is an exaggerated but telling metaphor for his massive building campaign, much of which is spelled out in the words of the Res Gestae Divi Augusti. The building campaign described in the marble inscription which constituted the emperor's epitaph and resume, includes his house on the Palatine, the Temple to Apollo, Portico d'Ottavia, Teatro di Marcello, multiple Victory temples, the Pantheon, Temple of Venus and Roma, Baths of Agrippa, Forum of Augustus, Temple of Caesar, Basilica Paulli, his Mausoleum, Ara Pacis and more.

Augustus also reorganized the city, dividing it into 14 Regions. It is under Augustus that the architect Vitruvius will write his ten books describing the art of building. Before I go on to discuss the specific monuments created by Augustus in the Campus Martius region, I want to give a brief review of Augustus' rise to power.

### Augustus' Consolidation of Power and Succession

Augustus was raised under the protection of Julius Caesar and adopted by him as his logical successor. In the years following Caesar's death Augustus had gradually risen to power eliminating his opponents, first his adoptive father's assassins and then his one-time associates Marc Antony and Cleopatra who he defeats in the Battle of Actium off the coast of Greece, receiving the title Princeps. Having consolidated power through martial law, in 27 BC Octavian "returned the res publica from my power to the discretion of the senate and people of Rome" Yet he is given other temporary (renewable) powers, as well as the honorific title of Augustus.

Tacitus notes that Augustus subjected all to his power under the name of princeps" but this was not an office with power, rather just a term of respect. Erich Gruen "Augustus and the Making of the Principate" makes the interesting point that Augustus was princeps but did not hold a principatus. Like Caesar before him he rejected the pleas by the people to become dictator, according to Suetonius baring his breast, tearing his clothes, kneeling before the people supplicating them not to make such requests.

In 23 he resigns as consul after nine years running, but is granted two new powers: that of maius imperium and that of tribunicia potestas, effectively power over the military and the courts. So bit by bit in an ad hoc manner he had obtained a series of privileges that gave him the powers of sole control over Rome without ever having been handed such a title. He was thus able to avoid appearing power hungry or disrespectful of traditional political roles. But if his consolidation of power was to have long-lasting results would have to come up with a strategy for passing on the reins. This concern for public image, this desire to set the stage for Rome after his death without

appearing to be institutionalizing one-man rule, will characterize several of the major building projects of his reign, from his own mausoleum to the altar of Augustan peace.

He almost dies in 23 BCE but does not appoint a successor and even offers to break the seal on his will to demonstrate to his critics that he held no claims to a dynasty. The most likely next in command, his nephew and son-in-law Marcellus, dies that same year in any case foiling any ideas Augustus may have had to pass the reins to him.

Not having any male offspring himself, and having lost Marcellus, Augustus seems to turn to his trusted advisor Agrippa who marries Giulia, Augustus' daughter and Marcellus' widow. They will give birth to Gaius and Lucius, both adopted by Augustus as his own sons. In the meantime Agrippa is granted the same powers Augustus had held: *maius imperium* and *tribunicia potestas*. Gruen suggests that, rather than appointing Agrippa as his heir, he sets Agrippa up to "earn" the right to rule in his absence. Agrippa dies in 12 BCE, Lucius and Gaius Ceasar in 2 and 4 AD. After his grandsons' deaths, he places his last hopes on Tiberius, the son of his wife Livia by a former marriage (and after Agrippa's death, the third husband of Augustus' daughter Giulia!). A convoluted series of adoptions occurs, Augustus adopting Tiberius, Tiberius adopting Germanicus, etc. Tiberius, like Agrippa, earns the titles which will allow him to rule upon Augustus' death which occurs finally in 14 AD.

Many of these personalities are illustrated on the reliefs of the altar of the Augustan Peace, commemorating the Pax Romana after the defeats of Spain and Gaul, which we now see in context. According to the *Res Gesta Augusta*, the altar was vowed July 4 13 BCE and dedicated on Livia's birthday in 9 BCE, just four years later. It is essentially a walled, decorated enclosure which contains an altar for sacrifices and other religious rites, allowing them to be visible frontally but kept separate from the viewer. Rather than glorify war, he invents a new deity for peace, and uses it to speak of his private concerns about succession of power after his death.

The Ara Pacis, when it was built between 13 and 9 BC, was situated along the Via Flaminia, with two entries, facing east and west. It presented an artistic program aimed at moral revival through hellenization, inspired by the frieze of the Parthenon, merging or linking of Ancient local traditions with new reality of imperial family. Its outer precinct, containing the most important reliefs, encloses a more simply carved sacrificial altar.

Countless articles have been written on the sculpture of the altar. Lower decoration is floral, related to Greek tradition for realistic vegetation imagery (according to an interesting paper by David Castriota). Diane Kleiner's article points out how portraits allow Augustus and his retinue to saunter seamlessly back and forth to the past. Story is one of fertility, regeneration, not of war. Role of women in procreation is dominant, no coincidence that it was dedicated on Livia's birthday.

### **Orologeum**

Nearby in the Campus Martius stands an obelisk brought by Augustus from Heliopolis Egypt in 10 BCE (it had marked the tomb of Psametticus II since the 6th c. BCE), while the Ara Pacis was under construction. The 30 meter tall monument is erected as the gnomon of an astronomical device, the markings of which are inscribed in bronze on the pavement according to the design of a Greek mathematician.

from Pliny's Natural History:

*"Augustus used the obelisk in the Campus Martius in a remarkable way, namely to cast a shadow and thus mark the length of days and nights. A paved area was laid out to commensurate with the height of the monolith in such a way that the shadow at noon on the shortest day might extend to the end of the paving. As the shadow gradually grew shorter and longer again it was measured by bronze rods fixed in the paving."*

Although it has been called a sundial, a solar clock, more recent analysis indicates it is a meridian or a solar calendar. This makes sense because Augustus had completed Julius Caesar's calendar reforms, with the renaming of July and August and the correction of Caesar's leap year which had been erroneously inserted every third instead of every fourth year. What does this have to do with the Ara Pacis? On September 23rd at sunrise, the shadow of the obelisk would penetrate the Ara Pacis and touch its main altar, an automated reminder that an annual sacrifice should be made to peace and it should occur on Augustus' birthday!

### **Augustus' Mausoleum**

Across the Campus Martius, in view of the obelisk though never in its line of shadow, stood the massive travertine-faced concrete drum of Augustus' first great construction, his Mausoleum. In 28 BCE, long before Augustus began his concentration on Pax and the Obelisk, and even before he is declared Princeps, he began construction of his own tomb. Thought to be modelled on the tomb of King Mausolus of Halicarnassus (where the word mausoleum comes from) but also on the tomb of Alexander the Great, the structure is 300 RF in diameter, 40 RF high at the outer wall. It was considered the 8th wonder of the world. Historians suggest that it was situated on a spot to be visible from river and road but especially in relationship to the Pantheon (Agrippa's temple to all Gods which was under construction at the same time but would later be destroyed and replaced by the Hadrianic Pantheon). Two obelisks adorned its entry.

Buried here in the century to come will be Livia, Tiberius, Agrippina, Drusus and Nerva, Trajan's remains are placed in his own triumphal column, breaking with this tradition, and Hadrian builds his own tomb to rival that of Augustus, across the river (where Castel Sant'Angelo now stands). In Hadrian's time the Mausoleum was still standing but the open square in front of it was now used for the relatively mundane practice of laying out construction projects as evidenced by the etched lines which scholars have connected with the pediment of the Pantheon. The last ruler we believe to have been buried here is the wife of Settimius Severus, Julia Domna, in the early 3rd century.

The urban plan that Augustus had carried out to turn the Campus Martius from a semi-abandoned and chaotically built flood plane to a self-referential monumental center can be said to have been completed at the time of his death and withstood the rest of the Roman empire with few modifications. But of course Rome doesn't end with the fall of the Empire and neither does the history of this site.

### **Mausoleum in Middle Ages and Renaissance**

Like many other Roman monuments, after 476, the end of western empire, the Mausoleum falls into disuse and is used as a fortress. It is controlled on and off by the Colonna and Orsini families among others, but its primary use through the Renaissance is that of a quarry for stone. Two lime kilns were known to exist on the site in the middle ages for transforming marble into quicklime. Some larger spoils are saved this fate: the obelisks would end up erected behind Santa Maria Maggiore (by Sixtus V) and the other in the 18th century on the Quirinal. In the 15th century Sixtus IV builds refugee housing for Illirian (Slavic) and Lombard refugees (as recalled by the church of San Girolamo degli Illirici nearby).

In the 16th century the Florentine Soderini family is given the property and after some more quarrying plants Italianate gardens which will persist in various hands until the 18th century. One of the families to control the property in the late 18th century is named Correa but comes from Portugal; they will rent the property to a Spaniard who organizes bullfights in what has become a true amphitheater.

This new vocation as a performance space will persist into the 20th century and were it not for certain turns of events might still be true today. Valadier, the same architect who completes Piazza del Popolo and restores the Colosseum designs an awning, or velarium, to enclose the theatre in 1819. With the unification of Italy, the theatre is enclosed, but shortly afterwards condemned and will remain essentially closed for decades. It does, however, find an appropriate use as a workshop for the bronze casting of the statue of Victor Emanuele for the Vittoriano. In the last "useful" phase of the life of the mausoleum it was once again dedicated to performance, this time musical. The Augusteo Auditorium was in operation from 1908 to 1936 and hosted over 1500 concerts and operas. Its last performance, music by Respighi, Wagner and Verdi took place on 13 May 1936. For over 50 years the orchestra of Santa Cecilia, Rome's conservatory, would be without a home, moving from the cinema teatro Adriano, the Teatro Argentina and the auditorium on via della Conciliazione. Actually, the fascist demolition of the theatre called for the creation of a new Auditorium on the site, the plans for which were drafted but never seriously continued. If we were to follow this tangent, it would take us through a number of proposals for musical performance venues proposed for sites such as Borghetto Flaminio and ignored until the 1990s when Renzo Piano's auditorium just down the road on the Via Flaminia would finally fill the gap.

Sventramenti and Auditorium

We mustn't forget that in addition to the Mausoleum under consideration, the middle ages and Renaissance saw increasing density of residential urban fabric in the Campus Martius. In 1936, however, just after the closing of the Augusteo, Mussolini begins demolition of the neighborhood which had grown up around the Mausoleum over the

years. This is part of the fascist regime's policy of "sventramenti" or disembowelling of the city to unveil and "liberate" archaeological sites, a policy which would effect many key neighborhoods of Rome such as Fori Imperiali, Teatro di Marcello, and the Borgo near St. Peter's. Entire neighborhoods were uprooted and important architectural works which had enriched the historical center of Rome from the middle ages through the 19th century were demolished.

### **Rediscovery of Ara Pacis**

Returning to the fate of the other monuments of the Campo Marzio in the intervening centuries, the Orologium had fallen, been buried but subsequently rediscovered and re-erected in the 18th century. , During the construction of Palazzo Fiano in the 1550s on the Via del Corso next to the medieval church of San Lorenzo in Luciana, that the carved stone reliefs of the Ara Pacis first came to light. These pieces of stone would be scattered around the world in years to come, some ending up in Florence with Medici's, others in France, some as tombstones in Roman churches and so on. Many are buried again and it won't be until the early 1900s that efforts begin in earnest to salvage the monument. These come to the fore in 1937 when for 15 days the ground under Palazzo Fiano is injected with a gas which causes freezing of the foundations allowing the salvaging of the remaining pieces.

Mussolini's goal is to reconstruct the Ara Pacis for the Millenium celebration of Augustus' rise to power (just as he was busy planning the 20th celebration of his own rise to power). He chooses to reconstruct the Altar in a different site, ignoring the importance of it as an urban monument and seeing it instead as a piece of sculpture to be put in a museum. This is not unprecedented: we should remember that since 1870 with the creation of the embankments around the Tiber, numerous buildings had been moved from their original locations and reconstructed elsewhere.

In the recreation of the Ara Pacis and redesign of Piazza Augusto Imperatore the same concern for image and connection to the past as had been shown by Augustus, is shown by the Fascist dictator. . Mussolini's architect, Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo, designed in the place of the dense medieval fabric the monumental, the rhetorical classical structures we see today, expressed in the academic language of Piacentini. Morpurgo had already completed the other three sides of the square although his designs for smaller two-story structures were vetoed in favor of the overscaled buildings we have today. He is also commissioned with the design and construction of a "display case" for the Ara Pacis which he designs but doesn't complete himself. Before construction is terminated, the racial laws in 1938 persecuting Jews caused him to be removed from his position. It is a fitting next chapter of the story that will have another Jewish architect, Richard Meier, design its replacement.

For decades Piazza Augusto Imperatore languished and the Ara Pacis in its display case, barely adequate at keeping out the rain, was destination to only the most diehard classical scholars and tourists. The Mausoleum of Augustus, open to the public only on rare occasions, became more and more degraded and Morpurgo's porticos filled with homeless and refuse.

The more recent history of the site begins in 1993 when Francesco Rutelli is elected mayor. After long period of preservationist momentum during which virtually no new buildings are constructed in central Rome, Rutelli launches a new period of growth which will not be without its critics. Inspired by Barcelona, and especially Richard Meier's MACBA museum there, he seeks out Meier at a meeting in Davos, Switzerland the following year and suggests a possible collaboration in Rome. Meier was enthusiastic, having spent a year at the American Academy in Rome in 1973 pursuing work on architects such as Michelangelo and Borromini. They discuss a project which could be financed by private funding and thus avoid a long and bureaucratic public competition. One of the unstated goals of the project was clearly to achieve for Rome what Meier had done for Las Ramblas, or what Ghery had more recently done for Bilbao.

In July 1996 Meier presented his project to city officials, an orthodox work of high modernism marked by Meier's clear leCorbusian inspiration but with a dominant travertine-faced wall as a concession to Rome (a detail Meier had used first in his California Getty musuem) The program was much greater than that of the existing box, in keeping with the modern museums' needs for gift shops, cafes, multimedia and other facilities. The total cost was a low \$20 million and Meier's fee far below his usual US rates, perhaps because of the privilege of building in Rome.

Over the next five years construction was slowed and occasionally blocked by the Archaeological superintendences' calls for archaeological investigations, common to any site in a historical city such as Rome. First by the national superintendent Adriano La Regina spent two years studying core samples before giving permission to proceed with reservation. Then the city superintendent Eugenio La Rocca called for excavations probes to determine what, if anything, remained of the Porta di Ripetta.

At exactly the same time, Meier was hired by the Vatican to design the most particular of the 50 churches planned for the Jubilee, winning a competition over Frank Gehry, Daniel Liebeskind, Peter Eisenman and others. Coming on the heels of the reconciliation of the Vatican with Jews, it seemed fitting (although entirely coincidental) that most of the architects selected to compete were Jewish. Meier's selection marked the first time a Jewish architect received a commission from the Vatican (and the first time Meier would design a church). It would be inaugurated in 2004, a hundred years after the inauguration of the new synagogue by Catholic architects Costa and Armanni and four years after the Jubilee it was meant to represent.

In 2001 Morpurgo's building is demolished, Rutelli steps down as mayor and Silvio Berlusconi is elected Prime Minister. The project by now has become an icon of ideological debate between modernists and classicists. Vittorio Sgarbi, right wing art critic, and cultural minister under Berlusconi's first government, would say "it looks more like a gas station in Dallas than a museum on Rome". Alternative projects were proposed by architects such as Leon Krier, Colin Rowe and students and faculty of the Notre Dame Rome program. When it finally opened in 2006 it will have taken over ten years (compared to just 3 for the one precious work of art it houses).

Despite (or perhaps due to) the controversial building, the site has received far more visitors than in years past. Many come to see temporary exhibitions which have little to do with Augustus, such as the show of fashion icon Valentino in 2007, or to attend conventions, parties or just observe the building. The spectacle of the new building with its massive wall, expanses of glass and giant columns at times eclipses the altar, like the washed-up but once-famous guest of honor at a trendy *soirée*. One wonders what will happen when the novelty wears off and the funding to maintain the pure white stucco dries up.

One also wonders if the monument will outlast its novelty since Rome's current mayor, Gianni Alemanno, campaigned on a pledge to demolish the building, a kind of modern *damnatio memoriae*. As it stands now, he has placed a low priority on these new "sventramenti" but intends to hold a populist referendum at some point and let the people decide, a dangerous proposition in a culture where public opinion is often manipulated by less-than-independent media.

The principle problem with Meier's building is not its anachronistic international style language but the limitation of the site as it was conceived. Rather than playing a role in an overall requalification of the Campus Martius as Augustus' structures had done, the new Ara Pacis museum stands as an autonomous object with little recognition or resolution of its surroundings. Meier was not tasked with considering the relationship with the river (which might involve reconsideration of riverside traffic) or with rethinking of the mausoleum of Augustus itself. It was only in 2007 that a competition was held with these aims. Meier's project is undoubtedly out of scale with Rome, though not with its immediate surroundings where in order to fit in with buildings that don't fit it, standing out may have been the only option. In any case, in the words of local architect Massimiliano Fuksas, "Rome can absorb anything".

In the last analysis, while various projects from the time of Augustus to the present day have tried to make the site consciously Roman, in attempting to erase what came before and start with a blank slate each one defeated the most Roman quality of all, the density of historical layers.

Rome, 2006