

PIAZZA DELLA SIGNORIA IS IN A MESS...



Piazza Signoria, arguably "ground zero" of both Renaissance and Modern Florence, is in a mess. A giant rectangle almost dead centre is fenced off and covered with a very prosaic metal roof which covers a pit about two metres deep. The interruption of the piazza is significant, both in its size and its location, forcing the crowds to snake around it to or from the Uffizzi courtyard and precluding any distant view of the Loggia del Lanzi. If this negative structure were a positive one, that is, solid, our perception and experience of the Piazza would be transformed. The protective roof and fence are clearly temporary, so we are relieved to assume that some sort of civic maintenance work is underway, and that as soon as the numerous workmen in the hole have repaired the pipes all will return to normal.

The small crowd watching through the fence is not, however, looking at old pipes. They are gazing at ancient walls, streets, doorways... entire rooms. Perhaps Roman, perhaps Etruscan. Certainly not Renaissance.

Florence has a bit of a problem. Like so much of Italy, the history runs so deep that its layers literally vie with one another for space, for recognition, for protection. If the ancient treasure is to remain exposed, the space of the piazza will be altered. If the Piazza is left as it was, we will be denied the excavations. As a small controversy brews, a local joke has it that the remains were discovered by a young American backpacker who accidentally upturned a cobblestone in the piazza. The civic government is accused of knowing about it all along. The gaping hole is now passed by thousands of people every day.

Roselle is an excavation site near the Tuscan seaside, on a hill overlooking a wide flat valley. The site is spectacular;

the remains - or what has thus far been revealed - are remarkable. A mixture of Etruscan and Roman, the small city had a forum, baths, a number of good-sized houses and an amphitheatre on the ridge of the hill looking out over miles of golden Tuscany beyond. A number of the streets are intact, mosaic tile floors have survived thousands of years, as well as fragments of wall frescoes. The continuing excavations are revealing what will surely rank as a major archaeological site. There were three visitors the morning we saw it.

South in Rome, recent digging near the Forum has uncovered what may be the very spot where Remus and Romulus - as legend has it - began what would become the greatest empire of them all. As the inevitable debate over verification heats up, archaeologists are cautiously excited; tour-group operators no doubt ecstatic.

On a good day in July, the Roman Forum attracts tens of thousands of visitors. Here they can walk, sit, picnic, photograph, pose, sketch, sunbathe, complain, exclaim, eat, drink, pee and for the most part be confused and amazed; the fora in Rome are amazing even to those who lack the expertise to imagine from the weathered fragments all that they once comprised.

A few years ago, a proposal was made to the city for a complete reconstruction of the fora, as would be possible from the exhaustive data that we possess. Archaeologists and traffic planners were horrified. To discover and then to expose to the destruction of modern pollution and tourism was somehow our responsibility, a part of the scientific research of a society we proudly proclaimed our distance from and superiority over. But the idea of reconstruction was blasphemous... and presumptuous. Who were we, after all, to try to imitate and rebuild the

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great monuments of Roman architecture (and muddle with the traffic flow in the process)? To try to recreate entire streets and buildings and yes, even *use* them. Far more respectful and proper of course to simply expose what survived and leave it to scholars and tourists ... after carefully picking through it like self-righteous grave robbers.

We sanctify the old with a curious fear and probably a great misunderstanding. It is possible to realize a thing's importance yet still not know what it means to us. Our adulation is somehow distant, obscure. The beauty we witness is overwhelming, we don't know what to learn from it or from its implications, so we make it a consumable item: clean it, package it, sell it. Then we sit back quite pleased with ourselves.

But the artifact endures long after we're done with it, to haunt generations that follow. What is its power? Can it be recreated? Is it the authority of an age which leads us to monumentalize these ruins; to pay a curious homage of enthralled consumption? Or is it the authority of the architecture itself we defer to? Can we critically appraise pieces of history like commodities on a store shelf? Can we gain any objectivity about what we create ourselves? If our relationship with what we consider 'past' is so fraught with peculiarity and inconsistency, how can we so recklessly embrace every - any - new particularity in this art.

The architectural condition of our own time is one of decadent confusion. It leads some to seek the repose of almost any stylistic haven, others to seek the presumably refreshing newness of chaos... a 'cult of dissonance'. We lack the certainty to look forward with purpose. We cannot look back because we don't know how. If we look at each other, we despair. The art

of architecture has become an individual undertaking. Solitary mumblings have necessarily replaced discourse because we have no common language. Without a language we grow mute, illiterate, no matter if some of the mumblings contain clear ideas, express valid thoughts, they are lost in the thick vacuity of our isolated preoccupations. We are timid in our radicalism, terrified of conservatism, and fearless in our voracious search for temporary new leadership: available new voices crying out this year's new theme, this month's idea, this week's flavour. Then, adopted with startling alacrity, it is as quickly discarded by its fickle disciples. We are as promiscuous architecturally as we are politically and materially.

So where can it be that we seek steadiness in a sea of turbulence? Is there a calm we can create in order to pensively chart our course? Not in stagnant self-satisfaction, as the arm chair radical will charge, but with the unclouded vision that is possible only when far from turmoil.

The ancient ruins retain a great dignity still, despite being so rudely exposed and exploited. They somehow rise easily above we weary tourists plodding over them. Can it be just the romance of age itself or were these buildings yet more wondrous when they were whole... when they were new? What will our own architecture look like 2000 or even 200 years from now? Will it have such power? Architecture speaks to all men. It has the ability to move us, and to suggest a world. It's authority is monumental. That should be a humbling realization ■

Jim Saywell nous fait part de ses réflexions sur le dilemme des fouilles archéologiques et entrevoit l'autorité de l'architecture dans sa monumentalité.