

An architect returns to Italy

The architect Renzo Piano has offices in Genoa, where he grew up; in Paris, where he currently lives; and in New York, where he is perhaps best known for having designed the Times Building, on Eighth Avenue. Piano spends a lot of time in New York—among his current projects is the new Columbia University campus that's going up in West Harlem— and he was in the city when he got a call, a year and a half ago, from Italy's President, Giorgio Napolitano. Napolitano wanted to appoint Piano a "senator for life." The job comes with a salary and a vote in the Italian Senate, and since it's "for life" there are no pesky reelection campaigns. Was Piano interested? He was taken aback.

"For some funny reason, you don't understand that you are aging," Piano said the other day, in Rome. "So when President Napolitano called me, I said, 'But I'm too young!' And he laughed over the phone, and he said, 'No, you are not too young.' "

Piano, who is seventy-seven, was sitting in his Senate office in the Palazzo Giustiniani, around the corner from the Pantheon. The room is almost entirely taken up by a large round table, and its walls are covered with drawings and plans. As soon as Piano became a senator, he handed over the office, along with his government salary, to six much younger architects and asked them to come up with ways to improve the periferie—the often run-down neighborhoods that ring Rome and Italy's other major cities. The six were about to present their first year's worth of work to the public, which was why Piano was in the capital.

"In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, the big challenge—in Europe certainly, but everywhere—was to establish as a principle that historic centers have to be preserved," he went on. "But in the two thousands—probably for the next three, four, five decades—the real challenge is to transform the periphery. If we fail in doing this, it will be a real

tragedy.”

Much as recent immigrants in France are shunted to the banlieues, in Italy they are pushed into the periferie. As immigration to Europe has soared, so, too, have tensions; in November, riot police were dispatched to Tor Sapienza, a neighborhood on the eastern edge of Rome, after residents attacked an immigrant center there. “The periphery is always accompanied by an adjective that is negative,” Piano said. “But the truth is the energy is there; the desire for change is there. There is always, even in the most difficult periphery, something good, and that is what you have to find, to bring up.”

In the early nineteen-seventies, Piano and his partner at the time, Richard Rogers, designed the Centre Georges Pompidou, in Paris. The building, with its inside-out construction, has been called “one of the most radical” of the twentieth century, and it transformed ideas about what a museum could be. Piano believes in the power of museums and libraries and concert halls. “They become places where people share values, where they stay together,” he said. “And this is what I call the civic role of architecture.”

Rome is full of what might be called un-civic architecture: projects that were started but not completed, like a halffinished sports complex that resembles a giant spinnaker; or completed and then abandoned, like the bicycle-sharing stations that dot the sidewalks but have no bikes. One of the projects Piano’s team came up with would use the space under an empty viaduct. The viaduct was supposed to improve tram service to the northeastern rim of the city, but the trams never arrived. Piano shrugged: “Typical.” Two of his young architects had drawn up plans to convert the viaduct into a sort of upside-down High Line, with a park running beneath. Only a tiny part of the project had been completed, but “in one year it’s not bad,” Piano said. He recalled his own years studying architecture, in the early-nineteen-sixties in Milan. He and his fellow-students were occupying the university, “so that was my job in the night,” he said. “And in the day I was

working in a nice office.”

“The real point for students like me was to change the world,” he said. “It was a kind of mad, insane, but great utopia. And I think it’s good to grow up like this, because you grow with this idea that never leaves you, so when you are seventy-seven you still feel like a kid and this is what you want to do.”

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