

ART UNDER SIEGE

"Open Museum Open City" in Zaha Hadid's MAXXI in Rome

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An exciting experiment in Rome's National Museum of the 21st century art (MAXXI) just came to an end: the project "Open Museum Open City". Its impressive concept is the occasion to reflect on the scandalous architectural constraints of Zaha Hadid's museum five years after its opening. Its foreclosure aesthetics undermines even the most impressive programmatic to open the museum to the urban life.



Photo: Maike Aden

For about a month, from 24 October to 30 November, Rome's National Museum for the Art of the 21st Century ("MAXXI") emptied its rooms, to fill it with nothing but with sound. In addition to this, further concerts, performances, screenings and debates were transforming the house into a large performative and participatory stage in the afternoon. The project "Open Museum Open City" should, so the artistic director Hou Hanru, convert the museum into a new "Roman Forum", where more than 40 artists and the audience create a connection between the inside and the outside, between the museum and the city, between the art world and the public. The social significance of this public space would be upgraded with creativity and imagination to redefine its architectural features.

This sounds like a great experiment. Nevertheless, at first sight the necessity of this project just in this museum was astonishing. This, because just this particular museum, constructed by the most successful and most decorated architect Zaha Hadid, is considered as an ideal "net of the inner and outer space"ⁱ that forms "the coexistence of multiple environments".ⁱⁱ Therefore it upgrades perfectly, so the prevailing view, the urban life of the somewhat run down neighborhood. The territorial partitioning of art seemed to be over here. Or?

Just as a quick reminder: In 2009, Zaha Hadid's Museum, the "officially best building in the world",

about that one would "speak in the history of architecture",ⁱⁱⁱ finally opened its doors after eleven years of planning and constructing and more than 150 million Euro total costs.^{iv} Critics praised the "epochal effort" of Zaha Hadid who didn't create merely a building, but a wonderful sculpture, modestly integrated into the urban quarter Flaminio. Admirers went in flights of fancy to laud "one of the most amazing buildings of the early 21st century",^v whose complex and abstract forms with their intertwined, mutually overlapping strands and dynamic swirling levels create a new, open, articulated space without beginning and end. The concerns of curators about the practicality of the curved walls, floating ramps and sloping floors for a decent exhibition practice was wiped away by mentioning the necessity of new architectural forms, that have to represent diversity and openness.^{vi} Five years after the opening everybody must experience that those premiere ovations don't withstand the reality. When one sets off to visit this museum of the superlatives outside the historical center of the art metropolis Rome one thinks to be mistaken by discovering a grey and dirty block of concrete already from far sticking out of the roofs of the old town houses and military buildings of this area. (That area makes – by the way – an absolutely intact impression. No Bilbao effect was needed here.) When on closer inspection the massive monster turns out to be Zaha Hadid's Museum, the disbelief gives way to stunned horror. A large, dark clump pushes into the Via Luigi Poletti with grim force.



Except the heavy and sharp-edged balcony, that erupts from the side of this dark buildig, the eye finds no single detail, interruption or element, where it could get stuck. Even the Olympic Stadium of Mussolini nearby looks exceedingly modest compared to this monotonous beast. But the real problem is that the dismissive gesture of this space for art is not only an aesthetic disaster. This becomes immediately clear when the high security fence, made of gray steel and stocked with numerous surveillance cameras, comes into view. This barrier, in conjunction with containers and a wall, shields the entire museum complex from the urban life. Even the snug forecourt with its green trees, installations and sculptures is only accessible at opening times through a camera-controlled sliding gate, which one reaches after a trip around this heavily guarded area of culture. From this angle, after all, the building looks a little bit more varied. However, the deterrent effects eliminates

any desire for looking at any detail.



Even the protective walls of the adjacent military and police barracks, built in the typical Roman red-yellow-beige sandstone, look comparatively welcoming. All the discourses about a sensitive integration of this museum in its urban environment are simply a joke. Moreover, a museum that entrenches the art in this way is a cultural disaster. The ubiquity of the outstanding art works in the streets, basilicas, palaces and churches of Rome, finds here, in the alienation of contemporary art, its sad counterpart. Although the MAXXI defines itself "as a great campus for culture [...] a new, open, articulated and permeable urban space".^{vii} That the institution can't fulfill these claims because of ongoing financial cuttings is anyway a very sad situation. But even the most generous funding couldn't overcome the unmistakable message of each architectural element of a rejection of the public and therefore the de-democratization of the art.



All diversified and low-threshold museum education programs or a high efficient public relations, even cheaper tickets (currently 11 € !) or longer opening times wouldn't change this scandalous state of siege of the art. Such efforts would remain an empty gesture of politeness as long as the museum forecloses the art works so demonstratively.

Just the fascinating city of Rome is the best lesson for the fact, that only the visible presence of art works anchored slowly and imperceptibly a sense of familiarity with the world of art. The ubiquity of all these magnificent demons of ecclesiastical power, courtly hierarchy and merciless segregation can prevent the development and self-education as well as it can contribute to it. It can control

perception as well as it can contribute to its sharpening. It can shape attitudes as well as it can contribute to its revision. Critical reflection, adoring pleasure, angry rejection and blunt acceptance: anything is possible. But one thing is clear: The MAXXI gives away every chance to develop a relationship between the people and the art of its time.

A museum full of sounds might be a good start, that contemporary art gets also a public stage without physical and symbolic barriers. It only would need to open the doors very far, so that the resonances inside the museum can unite outside at the street into a complete work of art made out of music, tones, sound, noise, dance, voices and silence as well as light and fun.

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Additional information: www.maikeaden.com

- i Eva Herrman: Wahrlich keine der üblichen Schachteln mit Kunstlicht. MAXXI – Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo; in: mapolis | Architektur; online auf <http://architektur.mapolismagazin.com/zaha-hadid-maxxi-museo-nazionale-delle-arti-del-xxi-secolo-rom>
- ii Website of the MAXXI; online: http://www.fondazionemaxxi.it/multi/de_maxxi.html
- iii Detail Daily; online: www.detail.de/daily/zaha-hadids-maxxi-ist-offiziell-bestes-gebaeude-der-welt-153/
- iv Vgl. Wikipedia: MAXXI. Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo; online: de.wikipedia.org/wiki/MAXXI_-_Museo_nazionale_delle_arti_del_XXI_secolo
- v Hanno Rauterberg: Wirbeln und Wogen; in: DIE ZEIT Nr. 47 2009; online: <http://www.zeit.de/2009/47/Rom>
- vi Ibid
- vii Website of the MAXXI; ibid