

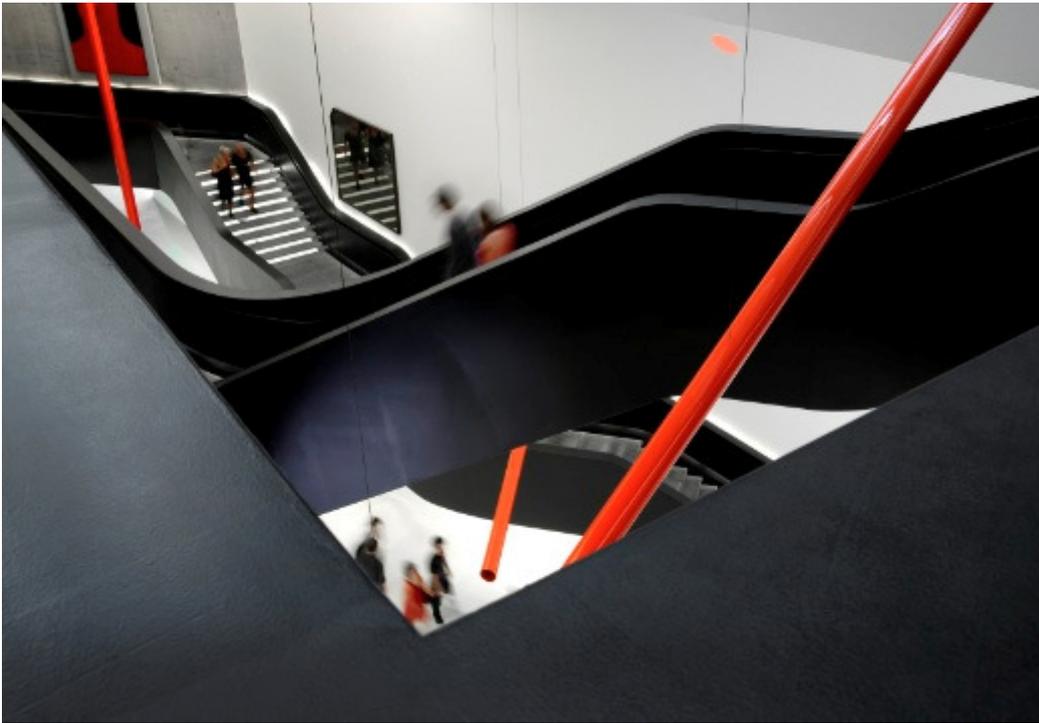
Crisis at MAXXI

APRIL 24, 2012 *by Luisa Grigoletto*



As recession-hit Italy tries to fight its way out of the euro crisis, contemporary art is paying a heavy price. Rome's MAXXI, the National Museum of Contemporary Art and Architecture, is the latest victim. Less than two years after it opened to great fanfare, the government announced a takeover this month due to 'a heavy budget deficit', according to the culture ministry. The news has sent shockwaves through Italian society as the museum was greatly praised when the state spent top dollar on Zaha Hadid to design the space.





In a terse and unsigned press release, the Culture Ministry blamed managers of the MAXXI Foundation for ‘failure to approve the 2012 budget’, which it says will accrue an €11-million deficit from 2012–14. The museum is also fighting allegations that it failed to plug an €800,000 gap in its 2011 budget. The foundation, which was appointed by the previous administration of ousted premier Silvio Berlusconi, expressed ‘shock and worry’, saying it was not notified directly by the ministry but instead by the media who came knocking on their door. The MAXXI Foundation disputes the government’s claims and says it is being targeted by the government.

‘There is no gap in MAXXI’s budget,’ said the foundation’s President Pio Baldi, who went on to label the alleged shortfall as ‘phantasmagorical’. According to the foundation, the €11 million figure is simply a budget target for the next three years. The sum, which was estimated by the foundation’s own economic planning committee, was presented to the culture ministry last month. ‘Confusing future budget requirements for a deficit is wrong,’ said Baldi. MAXXI, which boasts that it covered 50 percent of last year’s operating costs with ticket sales and other revenue, also insists that the 2011 gap had already been accounted for in the budget thanks to a 2010 surplus.

Furthermore, the gap came thanks to euro-crisis cutbacks handed down from the government, Baldi argues. ‘There’s no technical reason that could justify the hypothesis of compulsory administration,’ said Roberto Grossi, MAXXI Foundation vice president. ‘The real problem that nobody wants to talk about is the state disinvestment in MAXXI and other areas of culture.’ He has a point. In the last two years, public funding for MAXXI has drastically decreased from €7 million in 2010 to just under €4 million in 2011 – a 43 percent drop. That number is set to sink further in 2012 to just over €2 million. MAXXI, for its part, has been able to compensate for its slipping government funding by generating revenue on its own, according to the foundation’s accounting records: in 2010, it raised €3.3 million; in 2011 it raised €5.6 million; in 2012 it is on schedule to make €5.8 million.

The minimum budget required for the museum to function every year is between €10 and €11 million, half of which last year MAXXI was able to collect on its own. According to MAXXI Secretary-General Alessandro Bianchi, the museum is on par with similar institutions elsewhere in Europe. In some

cases, it does even better: the Centre Pompidou-Metz gets roughly 90 percent of its funds from public coffers; Barcelona's Museum of Contemporary Art receives around 75 percent.

For the first two years of being open to the public, the culture ministry said it awarded MAXXI a special bonus fund for acquisitions. From 2012 onward, Culture Ministry Director-General Antonia Pasqua Recchia said the museum was expected to come up with those funds on its own by building up support among private donors and sponsors, allowing MAXXI to 'stand on its own two feet'.

MAXXI currently lists several big names among its donors including BMW and Telecom Italia. The Lazio regional government surrounding Rome asked to join the founding members last year, thus assuring an additional €1.7 million over three years. But MAXXI says much of its outside contributions is now in jeopardy thanks to the takeover by the government.

'We were about to sign partnership contracts for about €1.8 million and close a deal with fashion house Fendi for tens of thousands of euros', said Baldi. 'Now I am afraid that because of this hasty move on the part of the ministry, there will be damages and negative consequences.' In short, the foundation fears that investors have now been scared off from what's been painted as a money pit.

The foundation has submitted a new budget plan with detailed accounting records and now it's up to the culture ministry to either approve or reject. The situation is extremely delicate and complex. In the past decade, contemporary art has made great strides in Italy. MACRO, Rome's other contemporary art museum, opened in 2002, prompting many to hope that Italy – and Rome in particular – was finally expanding beyond its devotion to classical art. The birth of MAXXI seemed to confirm those hopes. But just when many of the country's contemporary initiatives were gaining steam, they were met head-on by the financial crisis, creating a list of deadlines that have yet to be met. To name a few:

- A curator has yet to be appointed for the Italian Pavilion at the Architecture Biennial in Venice, which opens in August.
- Sardinia's Museo d'Arte has been without a director since the last one left in 2011.
- MADRE, the Naples' Contemporary Art Museum, is about to lose its director and the board of advisors but has not yet named new ones as the museum faces a budget shortfall in May.
- Last week CAM, Contemporary Art Museum, outside Naples [burned a painting by French artist Séverine Bourguignon](#) in an act of protest against the government's funding policy. Then a painting by Neapolitan artist Rosaria Matarese [was burned](#), followed by a photograph by Greek artist Filippos Tsitsopoulos. If the problem is not solved, the director has promised to burn more, at a rhythm of three works per week. He has received permission, support and collaboration from the artists, who watch the art-burning via Skype or in some cases actually light the match themselves.

Whatever happens at MAXXI is bound to set an important precedent. In a city more accustomed to classical art, the results of a government takeover will leave a lasting impact not just on the museum itself but on how Italy looks at contemporary art – as an asset or a liability.

About the author

