

# Italian upstart makes a splash

**“We need the public to animate this space.”**

ROME

## Modern art museum is struggling to establish a durable presence

BY ELISABETTA POVOLEDO

It's hard enough to be the new attraction in town when you're up against some of the world's most famous ancient Roman, Renaissance and Baroque monuments. But Italy's national museum for art of the 21st century, the Maxxi, faces even bigger challenges: Attracting a Roman audience, so far largely indifferent, and establishing a reputation on the international scene while the government is slashing financing for the arts.

So the leaders of the three-year-old museum have established a new strategy: playing to the crowd as it strives to broaden its mission and become Italy's premier institution of contemporary culture. “We need the public to animate this space,” said Giovanna Melandri, president of the foundation that runs the Maxxi, whose name is a play on the Roman numerals for 21.

Thus, on a recent muggy summer Monday, a day when the museum is closed to the public, the place hummed with activity — frenetic last minute preparations for an opening, a seminar attended by dozens of young architecture students and children on skateboards racing around the concrete courtyard.

Events in the near term included lectures on yacht design, Italian fashion, the art market and the links between food safety and architecture; jazz and Indian music concerts; a film series on contemporary architects; and a yoga class. That's on top of what Ms. Melandri calls the museum's “core business”: six current exhibitions, including a retrospective for Francesco Vezzoli, one of Italy's best-known contemporary artists.

In the staid world of Italy's state museums, such hyperactivity is nothing short of revolutionary. And it defines the role that administrators believe the mu-

seum must play. “Our task is to become the hub for a network of like-minded Italian institutions as well as the national center for contemporary art and architecture,” Ms. Melandri said.

Officials hope the museum's goals will come into sharper focus when its first director is named in September. Up to now programming has been set by the directors of various sections — art, architecture and so on.

Inaugurated in May 2010, the Maxxi has had considerable growing pains, principally because of a shortage of financing. In a country where the state foots the largest share of cultural budgets, austerity measures have left most institutions gasping and on the lookout for new forms of support.

Arts philanthropy has struggled to find a workable legislative formula here, in the face of the Culture Ministry's jealous hold on the nation's cultural patrimony and the prospect that tax revenue could decline if the government instituted wide-ranging tax credits for donations. “Our strategic objective is to build a cultural institution in Italy equally sustained by public and private funds,” Ms. Melandri said.

Maintenance costs alone for the museum, a mammoth structure of overlapping flowing spaces designed by Zaha Hadid, have ranged from \$6.6 million to \$7.9 million a year.

In its quest for revenue, the Maxxi has brokered deals with tour operators and events organizers and rented out spaces for gala dinners and corporate meetings. A museum membership program has been retooled and corporate sponsors, like the apparel maker Ermenegildo Zegna and the Italian energy company ENI, have been enlisted for joint projects related to their brands.

Last year, for example, Zegna commissioned a show for the artists Lucy and Jorge Orta, who used Zegna fabrics for their installation, and ENI provided archival material like sketches of old service stations for a current show about “oil and post-oil” architecture. The museum has also added bike racks, a rarity here. And in May it organized a fundraising dinner related to the Vezzoli show that raised \$525,000. Donors included

Italian fashion houses and national and international dealers and collectors.

Giancarlo Politi, the editor of Flash Art magazine, said it took Mr. Vezzoli's star power to attract donors, a move he described as an “intelligent” model for other struggling institutions to follow. “Maxxi doesn't have international clout yet — it's not MoMA or the Tate,” he said.

The Maxxi has been trying to improve its profile by collaborating with institutions abroad on shows that feature both Italian and foreign artists. “Galleria Vezzoli,” for example, is the first segment of a three-part international exhibition titled “Trinity.” It also includes “The Church of Vezzoli,” a show at MoMA PSI in Long Island City, Queens, in which the artist will reconstruct a de-consecrated church whose parts are transported from Italy. The third segment, “Cinema Vezzoli,” is expected to open in early 2014 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

The Maxxi's precarious financial situation makes long-term planning difficult, a problem common to many cultural institutions in Italy.

“Without continuity we lack credibility for supporters and even private donors who might want to bequeath art to a museum and have assurances that their donations will be safeguarded,” said Gianfranco Maraniello, director of the Museum of Modern Art in Bologna. “You can't build up a public that way.”

In the short term, however, the Maxxi's strategy has reaped dividends. Visitors in the first six months of this year topped 130,000, compared with 101,200 in the first half of 2012.

“I will be happy when visitors come to Rome to see the Colosseum, the Vatican City and the Maxxi,” Ms. Melandri said.

