‘A SYMBOLIC BRIDGE BETWEEN FAITHS’: HOLY GROUND FOR LIQUID RITUAL

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INTRODUCTION

The Tor Tre Teste Jubilee Church in Rome

As the new millennium approached, an ambitious project which is of interest in several respects was initiated in Rome. Under the slogan ‘50 Chiese per Roma 2000’ (50 Churches for Rome 2000), the Bishop of Rome, with the Italian conference of bishops and the Vatican in the background, wanted to realize fifty new, ‘modern’ churches in the extensive suburbs of the Eternal City (De Jonge 2002, sub 7.2, 204–206; Spens 1997, 208–219; La Chiesa del 2000 1997; Ennis 2004, although very critical; Bigliardi). Behind this prestigious project lay not only the attempt to catch up with the needs of church infrastructure in the Roman suburbs, but also a general (but sometimes more pointedly designated as missionary) programme of evangelization and inculturation. By constructing new ritual spaces, the Roman Catholic Church sought to establish its presence in the post-, high- or late-modern culture. Within the project there was one spearhead with a specifically assigned, concrete location. One church would be the Jubilee Millennium Church. A triangular plot far out on the eastern edge of the city was chosen as the locus for this project, in a neighbourhood that was called Tor Tre Teste (see ill. 1–6).

As so often happens in Italy, the fifty-church project ran aground on great financial and planning obstacles. Ultimately only a fraction of the fifty churches were in fact built. The spearhead of Tor Tre Teste also became a protracted story, with many squabbles, delays, debates, oversights, technical problems, financial holes and overruns, etc. But despite all of this, a church did arise on the site. It is not within the scope of this article to examine the whole of this extensive story, but rather I will focus on the design in a general sense, and the discussion regarding it.
The first, primarily Italian call for proposals in 1993, via a competition (the normal procedure for projects of this sort), ended in chaos and failure. There were too many participants (over 200) and designs (534), too many of which were from young, inexperienced architects, and after mature reflection it was realized that the criteria had not been clearly stated and the invitation programme of requirements had been too complex.

After this, in 1995 six top international architects were invited to each submit a design. The winner would be selected from these. They were big names from trend-setting architectural firms: Tadao Ando, Günter Behnisch, Santiago Calatrava, Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, and Richard Meier. In compiling this list, an explicit connection was sought with the state of the art of modern architecture. The Roman Catholic Church was to play a guiding role in the long-running discussions in Italy about church architecture for the future. (The Italian bishops had been particularly active on this point since the 1970s.) In contrast to the previous failed call for submissions, this time the invitation programme of requirements was extremely short and clear, less than one page of typing paper (cf. La Chiesa del 2000 1997, 70 [Italian], 71 [English]). The Jubilee Year was cited as the impetus; a welcoming church was to be constructed to mark this event—a welcome directed to Rome as a pilgrimage destination, and to the neighbourhood, which would be upgraded through the presence of this church, which would further be a part of the ‘new evangelisation’. To cite from the programme: ‘What is being asked of the architect, then, is to design a space that says “place of welcome, place of convocation, a churchly place”. This is the only significance requested, in the conviction that the architect can express it in his making architecture.’ In closing, there was a request for beauty, contemporary beauty: ‘[I]t is asked of the architect, but in an undertone in the awareness that daring words are being pronounced, that in his making architecture he makes the effort to express the up-to-dateness of the beautiful, to use an expression dear to H. Gadamer.’

When the result was announced in March 1996, it was the design by the Jewish-American architect Richard Meier that won the competition. The designs were presented in an exhibition, at press conferences, and in many publications.

When the winner was announced, a fierce debate about the winning design burst out, not only in Italy, but internationally (from a file of more than eighty (internet) publications, I mention only: Simongini