

# Uffizi renovation moves fitfully forward

By Ian Fisher

## FLORENCE

**A** bright yellow crane has recently gone to work, the most solid sign yet that the reconstruction of the Uffizi Gallery here may really, finally, actually happen.

But even with the ground broken, 10 years after the project was first announced, few are betting on it.

"In Florence, the disputes are never over," said Antonio Natali, the museum's director. He is so weary of the arguing and delays that he agreed to an interview only if he did not have to talk about anything contentious. Which is almost everything.

"I prefer, in this moment, the quiet that lets work get done," he said.

It is hard to blame him. Nearly 30 years have passed since the lower of the Uffizi's two grand floors was emptied of a mass of state archives. Thus the old Medici office complex, begun in 1560 by Vasari, was opened to a needed, if theoretical, expansion.

But only in the last few months did the new Italian government defrost two long-planned and long-delayed projects to expand and update the museum, including a controversial modern exit by the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki.

Now work is going ahead on a project expected to cost, in all, about €50 million, or about \$65 million, and last five years. The first of two cranes is in place, modern 45-meter, or 150-foot, spires in this city of many closely guarded old ones, and the six work sites are being fenced in and secured. All of the countless relevant authorities seem to be in favor, an occurrence as rare in Italy as planetary alignment.

But the doubters remain vocal.

"I don't think Florence should be put under a glass case," said Annamaria Petrioli Tofani, a former Uffizi director who is among the dissenters to parts of the project. "But I think we should be careful. We can do this only if we respect history."

The need for an expansion has never been questioned: Paintings by Leonardo, Botticelli and Michelangelo, a few of the masters who make up the museum's extraordinary collection, are jammed so closely that they practically overlap. Tourists without reservations can wait outside for hours when Florence is crowded. Last year 1.5 million people visited the Uffizi, up 20 percent over the previous year.

Over the years, two projects have taken shape, and each has attracted its own opponents.

The first is an internal one: nearly to double the exhibition space — to 13,000 square meters from 8,000, or 140,000 square feet — while adding two large stairways, elevators, a restaur-

ant and a café. The expansion of the galleries would allow both added space between the paintings and more display room for the some 3,000 works in storage. The new stairways would allow tourists who wanted a shorter visit

to leave without traveling, as they now must, through the entire gallery space.

"Those who want to take more time can do so," Natali said, comparing the museum to a poem that some devour quickly and others sip slowly.

In theory, the number of visitors, now as many as 7,000 a day, would be able to double.

The second project is a new exit, whose design was the subject of a competition. This was won in 2000 by Isozaki, who also designed the Kyoto concert hall, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and buildings for the Olympics in Barcelona and Turin. Isozaki, who once studied in Florence, envisions the exit as a steel-and-stone echo of the statue-filled Loggia dei Lanzi in nearby Piazza della Signora.

The contrast between old and new became, perhaps inevitably, one target of criticism. Under the administration of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, an undersecretary of culture froze this exit project (and caused some offense when he wrote an article with a headline calling Isozaki a "kamikaze of architecture").

Architectural ruins were discovered near the site, causing more delay.

But not all the opposition focused on the exit. Petrioli Tofani, for example, said she largely liked Isozaki's plan. "He is a learned man," she said. "He was perfectly aware that he was not building in a desert."

Rather, she and others have complained about the internal changes.

Some opponents, like Riccardo Francovich, professor of medieval archaeology at the University of Siena, who consulted on parts of the project, worry about whether the new construction, especially the staircases, would destroy underground ruins and archaeological sites. A particular complaint is whether one of the staircases would require any demolition to the foundation of what remains of the San Pier Scheraggio church, where Dante and Boccaccio are said to have preached.

Petrioli Tofani said she was most concerned that all of the pieces might not fit together in a way that preserves the character of the Uffizi, which she called its own "work of art."

"I am not against today's creativity," she said. "What is important is that today's creativity is not at the expense of the past."

Paola Grifoni, Florence's superintendent for architecture, said the plans take into account these concerns. The



Il restauro degli Uffizi avanza in modo irregolare (ac)

staircase, she said, will not touch the church foundation. She argued that the projects would change very little, given all that needed updating.

"It's not a destructive renovation," she said. "It is extremely conservative."

Francovich, however, said he hoped there would still be room for it to evolve. "It should be more organic," he said. "The project should have all the flexibility necessary to make changes."

*Peter Kiefer contributed reporting from Rome.*



Fabrizio Giovannozzi/The Associated Press

*Work began last month in the inner court, above, of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Renovation plans, below, include an exit by the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki.*



Francesco Bellini/The Associated Press