



the
glory
that
is

rome

spurred on by an energetic mayor and the impending year 2000 jubilee, the city has embarked on a monumental program of restoration and revival.

by jo durden-smith photographed by pieter estersohn

Being mayor of Rome has been called a lot of things over the years but “comfortable” isn’t one of them. Yes, the incumbent

inherits the grandest possible office in a palace (the Palazzo Senatorio) designed by Michelangelo, on a hill (the Capitoline, or Campidoglio) that is one of the most extraordinary Renaissance stage sets on Earth. To the right of City Hall, hidden behind the imposing Palazzo dei Conservatori, are the remains of the 2,500-year-old Temple of Jupiter, the most sacred spot in the Roman world; to the left is the first public collection of classical statuary ever set up, and all around—in the immortal words of W.W. Jacobs—is more history than can be consumed locally. Saint Mark is said to have written his Gospel a stone’s throw from here; Petrarch was crowned with his poet’s laurels here; and Gibbon was inspired to write his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* here. It’s no wonder a 12th-century guidebook to the ancient city described the Campidoglio as the head of the world.

A glance out of the rear office window, however, will confirm that all this comes at a considerable price. For the view over the three remaining columns of the Temple of Castor and Pollux, across the ruins of the Roman Forum, is a reminder that Rome—more so than other capital cities—has to spend millions of dollars a year just to keep its historic monuments in the same shape they were a century ago. The sight of the Colosseum, on the Forum’s southeastern flank, underscores the price to be paid for not doing so—\$255 million at last count to restore the arena that is the symbol of Rome, plus the Forum and its museums.

An eighth-century traveler gloomily predicted that if the Colosseum ever fell, so would Rome, so would the world. This thought, no doubt, gives a certain edge to Mayor Francesco Rutelli’s morning approach to the office, up the Cordonata, the steps designed by Michelangelo that rise from Via del Teatro di Marcello to the Piazza del Campidoglio. For it passes not only the statue of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, from which one of the popes hung an earlier city prefect by his hair for getting out of line, but also the statue of one Cola di Rienzo, the son of a local tavernkeeper, who also wanted to recover the glory of the classical city. At first his compatriots greeted the idea with enthusiasm—especially since he had great oratorical style. But after di Rienzo suggested that the restoration effort might re-



quire raising taxes, he was promptly lynched. It seems unsurprising, given these precedents, that since World War II the mayors of Rome have lasted in office for an average of two years. Not anymore, though. Seven years ago, the Italian parliament announced that municipal mayors would be elected directly, rather than being decided on by coalition brokers. The result is that the 43-year-old Rutelli—high up in the mayor’s office in the Palazzo Senatorio—is already enjoying his second four-year term. Certain things never seem to change in Rome, of course: Outside, in the ceremonial square, a delegation of striking cabdrivers is shouting up its displeasure at the idea that taxis might actually cruise the streets (right now they wait at taxi ranks), as they do in other cities (and perhaps—just perhaps—work longer hours). But Rutelli has come to terms today, he says, with one of the other unions, to allow more street cleaners to be put on the payroll; and he seems to have ended the brutal farce of the old days, in which city workers were virtually unmanageable. Indeed, Rome and Rutelli—to mark the Vatican’s Jubilee next year—are now embarked on the biggest facelift the city has had in modern times. Rutelli—an ex-archi-

Mayor Francesco Rutelli (bottom left), who has spearheaded the revival of the city, came to office in 1992 with the goal of “repositioning the image of Rome.” He’s done that through high-profile accomplishments such as jump-starting the languishing restoration of the Borghese Gallery (above). When he took office, the 17th-century villa, once the residence of Cardinal Scipione Borghese, a great patron of the arts, had already been under restoration for 13 years—a symbol for the malaise gripping the city. Opposite: Stefano Aluffi-Pentini, head of A Private View of Italy, has entree to the palazzi of the city’s aristocrats. Beside him is Donna Teresa Coppa Solari Massimo Lancellotti in the main hall of her 16th-century Palazzo Massimo di Pirro, one of the city’s finest pre-Baroque palaces.

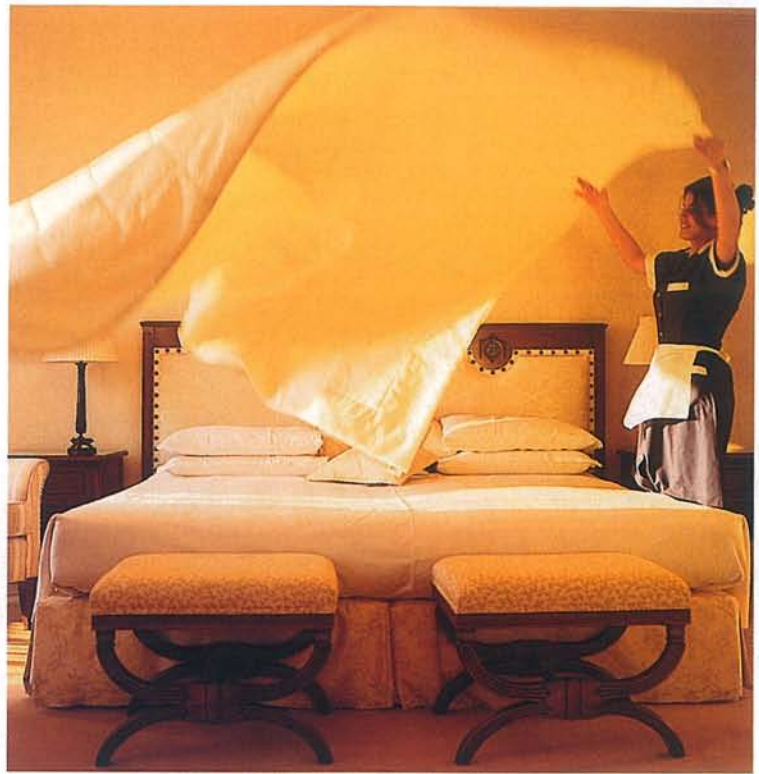
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tect and one of the founders of Italy's Green Party—has been overseeing the spending of some \$6 billion in public and private money on everything from the excavation of the emperor Nero's huge Golden House (once 25 times the size of the Colosseum) to the building of a new underground roadway and car park beneath the Janiculum Hill for the 29 million visitors the city is expecting next year. To a Rome-lover like me the city today is an inspiring sight, with down-in-the-mouth buildings one by one emerging from behind scaffolding—almost bashfully clean—into the light.

After a scandalous 13 years of closure for refurbish-

ment the Borghese Gallery, with its Berninis and Caravaggios, was reopened in 1997; and the famous Ludovisi collection of Greek and Roman sculpture, much of which had languished in storehouses since before World War II, is on show again in a restored Renaissance palace, the Palazzo Altamps, near Piazza Navona. Meanwhile, much of the traffic (except for the pesky Vespa) has been shifted from the medieval center of the city—to be replaced by purring electric buses. In the constant conflict between Rome's present and past, a conflict that's led over the centuries to the destruction of so much of its legacy, it's as if the past has finally been allowed to fight back—and there is no doubt its retaliation is hurting. Confronted with almost daily reroutings, the *pazienza* of the Romans—their I've-seen-it-all-before-and-don't-give-a-damn attitude—has taken a serious beating.

Rutelli laughs when I suggest this to him. "Yes," he says, "it's not paradise. There are over 1,000 working sites in the city, from the airport and the ring road to the reconnecting of the Appian Way. But if you look at the opinion polls, you'll see the vast majority of people believe that Rome is improving. And because of this they're very patient in this difficult moment—they acknowledge

The *buon gusto* of Agata e Romeo, one of the city's best small restaurants, comes from chef Agata and maître d' Romeo Caraccio (above left). A maid makes up the Royal Suite (above right) of the Hotel Eden, one of the city's most luxurious hotels. Left: History is at your feet at Farnese, Rome's finest emporium of historical floor tiles.





that the city has to change.” He nods ruefully for a moment in the direction of the chanting cabdrivers. “And I mean not only physically, but a change mentally, in our habits, in the way things are run: taxis, buses, street cleaning, the bureaucracies, everything. When I became mayor or getting a building permit in Rome was a nightmare—it required twenty-six signatures. Now it takes just four.”

At this point, his phone rings for the third time since we’ve started talking. I shamelessly eavesdrop and soon realize that he’s speaking to Pascual Margall, the man who as mayor transformed Barcelona into a gleaming, fashionable host for the Olympic Games. The connection between the two men, I reflect—as Rutelli strides out into the huge space of his office, talking with obvious pleasure—could hardly be apter. For Rome, for all its imperial trappings, is still at bottom a working-class city. In the sixth century it had a population of just 20,000, living in a state of utter dereliction on the bank of a filthy river. And even after the Renaissance, for all the wealth of the Vatican, Romans still lived without drainage in the middle of a malarial wasteland infested by bandits. As late as 1871, when Italy reunified, there were still only 200,000 Romans—a third of them beggars—and a century later, though the city was by now the country’s capital, the citizenry was not much better off, materially speaking. In the 1970s, after succes- (continued on page 225)

Despite having been enlarged from 10 to 20 tables, Il Convivio is still romantic and intimate. It’s run by this triumvirate (above, left to right), Giuseppe, Massimo, and Angelo Troiani. The Villa Medici Suite (below) in the Hotel Hasler is one of the greatest perches in all Rome. The twin towers of the Trinità dei Monti church loom up right in front; in the distance is the dome of St. Peter’s. Opposite: The morning sun lights up the loggia of the Palazzo Altemps, one of the city’s most important new museums. It houses the Ludovisi Collection, the most important collection of ancient Roman sculpture in the world.

