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## Chance Encounter on the Tiber



*Chance Encounter on the Tiber*, Rome, May 2010. Photo: Marco Martinelli

For centuries, the most well-known transformations of public space have been massive, expensive architectural interventions. The [High Line](#) in Manhattan is just one of the most recent examples. In the 1980's William Whyte highlighted the success and failures of public spaces in New York in his study, [The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces](#). Whyte pointed the way towards a viable, low-cost, high-impact alternative way to revitalize public space that did not rely only on design.

With this in mind, the abandoned walkways along the [Tiber River](#) in Rome presented an ideal experimental space for furthering this discussion: how might these walkways be turned into active public spaces? Although the original purpose of the embankments was to protect Rome from floods, today the walkways are essentially unused by Romans and visitors alike.

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Robert Hammond decided to put 100 movable park chairs in the open space along the river and I recognized the site as an ideal environment for my musical composition *Chance Encounter*, which was written expressly for performance in transient public spaces. Co-conceived with, and composed for soprano [Susan Narucki](#), the 35-minute piece is designed so that a chamber orchestra arrives from all over the city, ready to play.

Since our perspectives were complementary, we decided to create the project together: [Chance Encounter](#)

[on the Tiber](#). Hammond was inspired by Whyte's discovery that people create ownership of public space by being able to control where and how they sit in the urban environment. We combined Whyte's methods with my composition *Chance Encounter*, which is specifically designed to break down the conventions of concert music: assigned seats in fixed rows, performers on defined stage spaces, paid admission, and fixed, ritual attention. (We partnered with [Tevereterno](#), a local organization which produces cultural events promoting the Tiber River. They helped us obtain approvals from the 23 local and state governing agencies.)

The biggest surprise was that the 100 park chairs, even after having been painted red, were not enough to attract people from bridges and streets above — down to the banks of the Tiber. Hammond realized that our site was unused *and* low in pedestrian traffic, while many of the unused sites that Whyte had studied were high in pedestrian traffic. Sometimes bicyclists stopped and used the chairs to rest, or people ate lunch while sitting in them, or groups of teenagers would sit and smoke, but many chairs remained empty during the day. It was clear that both seating and programming, in combination, were essential to this experiment.

The project culminated on Monday, May 31 with a combination of these two ideas — the chairs and the performance — on the Tiber River near the Ponte Sisto (Sixtus Bridge). Hammond placed the chairs on the river in the morning and left them there all day to see how people would use them, and I organized two free musical performances in the early evening.

During the performances, people used the chairs in a broad variety of ways and orientations — not always facing the musicians, but some in clusters or facing the water. On the periphery, people continued conversations or read while listening to music. They did not behave like a concert audience, but felt free to walk around and hear the music from different locations within the space. Audiences also gathered on the bridge and upper walkway, watching and listening from above.

On Sunday May 30, there was a preview of the project at the new [MAXXI museum](#) (Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo) designed by [Zaha Hadid](#), which opened to the public that day. MAXXI is the largest museum of contemporary art in Rome, and one of the largest new buildings in Rome in decades. In so many ways, this space could not be more different from the Tiber River site — in a city whose public spaces are largely Baroque piazzas with Classical ruins in sight, Hadid's building is a striking anomaly.

In the morning, Hammond set up 100 red chairs throughout the sunny piazza. As the day progressed, one could see people move the chairs to the shade under the building and trees. Unlike the Tiber River, this site had abundant pedestrian traffic that allowed the chairs to work their communal magic: couples kissed, families created picnics, teenagers hung out and talked. (The previous day, when MAXXI was open to select guests, the piazza was only used as a backdrop for photos. On subsequent visits to the museum, Hammond observed that the piazza mostly deserted even when the museum is crowded.)

City officials are now considering the possibility of having 1,000 movable red chairs on the Tiber River next year for over a month — possibly incorporating new music written just for Rome. In October, the musical composition, *Chance Encounter*, will receive its Canadian premiere in Vancouver, as part of the [Music on Main Festival](#).

Over the past several decades, there have been hundreds of architectural plans and ideas for activating the walkways along the Tiber River. We hope one of the lasting impacts of *Chance Encounter on the Tiber* is that it will encourage planners and citizens to think about non-design-related solutions. Combining the transformative power of performance with urban planning ideas opens up the visioning of public space to everyone.

*Robert Hammond is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Friends of the High Line, and was the 2010 Garden Club of America Rome Prize recipient.*

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