

\$18 Million Refit of Colosseum Will Give Visitors a Gladiator's View

The winning design for a new floor for the Roman landmark, planned to be ready for 2023, will cover the exposed subterranean chambers and reconnect "the thread of time."

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Inside the Colosseum in April. The chosen design for the flooring features a lattice of specially treated wooden slats that can be rotated to allow air to circulate. Domenico Stinellis/Associated Press

ROME — It is a view that gladiators would once have experienced as they

prepared for mortal combat: staring into the banked crowds of the Colosseum, perhaps under the gaze of the mighty Roman emperor himself.

Nearly 2,000 years later, visitors to the Colosseum will again be able to stand in almost the same place and imagine the spectators' roar, after the Italian Culture Ministry on Sunday announced the winning project in a competition to build a replacement floor for the landmark in Rome.

[The chosen design](#) features a lattice of specially treated wooden slats that can be rotated to allow air to circulate and to expose the beehive of subterranean corridors. It was created by a team led by [Milan Ingegneria](#), an engineering consulting company, and is expected to cost about 15 million euros, or \$18 million. The surface is expected to be in use by 2023.

At the moment, most of the underground chambers are exposed to view, with only a small section of floor at one end. That section — about 650 square meters, or 7,000 square feet — was installed in 2000 and was used for the first time that year for [a staging of "Oedipus Rex,"](#) by Sophocles.

Alfonsina Russo, director of the Colosseum and its archaeological park, said the latest renovation would allow visitors to sample the effect of standing in the middle of the arena.

"Reconnecting the thread of time, we are finally returning to the public the same view that people had from the stage of the monument during antiquity," she said Sunday during a news conference to announce the winner.

Before the pandemic brought global travel to a near standstill and closed many monuments and museums, the Colosseum was Italy's most visited site, with more than 7.6 million people taking in its glory in 2019 alone.

Some experts and archaeologists have questioned the need for the covering. The art historian and essayist Tomaso Montanari said, "From the point of view of cultural policy, it serves no purpose."

He criticized "the idea that the monument, as it is, is not enough and has to be transformed into a location for something else."

"Monuments are not things to be filled," he added. "It's all very ridiculous, it's Italy seen via Las Vegas."

Sergio Rinaldi Tufi, a retired archaeologist who worked at the University of Urbino, also expressed skepticism. He said that the section of the arena that had been built in 2000 "already gave a good idea of the relation between the auditorium, the arena and the underground area" and that there was no need to create "a false arena."

Visitors to the Colosseum today are privileged to see its underground area, he added. "It's unique in the world," he said. "It will be a shame to cover it."

But the Italian culture minister, Dario Franceschini, said at the news conference that, from the center of the arena, "the majesty of the monument" could be more fully absorbed. He called the Colosseum "a symbol of Italy in the world."

Mr. Franceschini acknowledged the debate about the suitability of the plans — "It is natural," he said — but he asserted that the project combined "sustainability, conservation, improved protection and technological innovation" and was "of great value." Carrying out the renovation is "a significant challenge for Italy," he added.

The warren of underground corridors that is currently exposed would centuries ago have formed the Colosseum's bustling backstage, with cages

and pens for wild animals and [underground pulleys](#) to raise the beasts to the arena floor. Those and other areas were buried until the late 19th century, when the hypogeum, or underground area, began to be excavated.

Mr. Franceschini noted that the floor of the arena had been intact at that time and referred to [one photograph](#), from about 1870, that showed the hypogeum totally covered.

The new surface will be installed at the level of the original flooring of the monument, which was inaugurated in about 80 A.D. Among the innovations of the chosen project, one of 11 designs considered, rainwater will be collected for the monument's public bathrooms.

Referring to the winning design, Ms. Russo, the Colosseum director, said, "The structure is light and recalls both in form and function the original plan of the wooden arena at the time it was first in use." She added that the project had taken into account requirements to protect the monument and to be ecologically sustainable.