



# Spaced out

## THE EUROPEAN PRIZE FOR URBAN PUBLIC SPACE

**The European Prize for Urban Public Space is an impressive sounding award backed by some of Europe's leading architectural bodies. But with decisions and dialogue about public spaces often having little connection with those who actually use them, do the 2006 winners and shortlist reflect issues beyond aesthetics?**

Text by Alexander McSpadden

After a long period of neglect and decline, a slow but strong movement to recover the public spaces of Europe has marked the past decades. However the pace and experience has been frustrating. And for many experts in the field these efforts at urban renewal are often diverted into the wrong type of schemes. Recent years have seen a trend towards reductionism and programmatic simplicity in public city projects that threatens to produce a homogenisation and impoverishment of the urban landscape throughout Europe. In 2000, as a counter-weight to this emerging trend, the Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCCB) and the Institut Français d'Architecture founded the European Prize for Urban Public Space, a biennial competition that aims to highlight the importance of public space as a catalyst of urban life and foster investment by public administrations in its creation, conservation and improvement.

### HEAVYWEIGHT BODIES

Since the prize started the number of entries has risen from 81 to 208, and the organising institutions have expanded to include the Architecture Foundation (London) Nederlands Architectuurinstituut (Rotterdam), Architekturzentrum Wien and Museum of Finnish Architecture (Helsinki). These heavyweight bodies and their directors - which form the prize's jury - view the prize as an important way of shaping the discourse concerning Europe's investment in public space. For jury member Aaron Betsky (director NAI, Rotterdam), the prize seeks to move the debate on from 'designs that simply clean-up the inner city of Europe to designs that connect us through space to a larger concept of who we are.' An important feature of the competition is that the prize is jointly awarded to the architectural team and the city administration that funded the urban project. In doing so, the organisers seek to influence not only the thinking of leading architectural practices, but also city authorities and administrators across Europe.

Of the 208 entries coming from 31 European countries, this year the jury jointly awarded first prize to Morske Orgule / Sea Organ (Zadar, Croatia) and A8ernA (Zaanstad, Netherlands) with mentions to the Piazza Nera Piazza Bianca (Robbiano, Italy), New Zgody Square / Remodelling of the Bohaterów Getta Square (Krakow, Poland) and a special jury prize for ZwischenPalastNutzung/ Volkspalast (Berlin, Germany). The wide range of projects reflects the diversity of the vital issues highlighted by the regeneration of urban city centres: from strategies for connecting different publics in the same environment, to the reconciliation of past architectural designs with the present needs of the city's residents.

### COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Although the prize-winners differ greatly in typology and areas of intervention, a common link between all of them is the great degree of community participation in the planning stage and subsequent phases. The A8ernA project in Zaanstad (a municipality made up of the merger of seven villages near Amsterdam) directly involved the local community to such an extent that according to NL Architects, which headed

**A8ernA, Zaanstad, The Netherlands, 2006 by NL Architects.**  
Developer: Zaanstad Programma.  
Management: Dienst Stad.



up the design team, 'none of the town residents complained after it was completed because they felt that they all took part in it.'

In the early 1970s an elevated highway was constructed in Zaanstad, which tore right through its centre and produced a brutal separation between the two different parts of the city. The space under the highway was used solely for parking cars and storage, creating a type of void in the urban tissue. In the initial design process, the architects carefully considered who were the people that used the empty spaces of the city - youths and the elderly - to find a solution to tie these groups together and to the larger fabric of the urban environment. The result is a skate zone with a graffiti gallery, placed next to a remodelled church square and a small park with benches and panoramic deck on the riverbank; different atmospheres that are physically close and connect with each other.

**URBAN IMAGE**

Bringing the urban space to the edge of the water collectively links the town's residents to their natural geographical environment. In the other first prize-winner designed by Nikola Basic, Sea Organ, the reconstruction of the city's neglected seafront takes on an unexpected aural dimension. The intervention, a set of 75 metre-long cascading stairs along the shoreline of the city of Zadar in Croatia, incorporates maritime hydraulics to produce an endless concert. Built into each sequence of stairs are pipes of different lengths that emit sound as the sea pushes against them. The steps function as a type of architectural instrument; designed with a seven chord tonal structure derived from the matrix of traditional Dalmatian a cappella singing. The city's coastline has since become a popular area for locals to congregate and also provided an eminent tourist destination to enhance Zadar's new urban image.

Among the other projects shortlisted for the prize, the main issue was not so much about creating a new 'image' but showing how architectural design can reactivate the past for a contemporary context. The

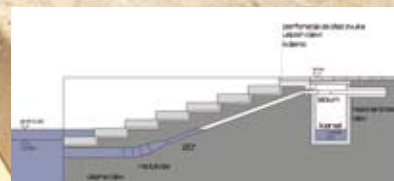
restructuring of the Bohaterów Getta Square in Kraków provides a poignant example of how absence can create presence in spatial and metaphorical registers. Archive footage of the dilapidated objects and abandoned furniture left behind after the Nazis liquidation of the neighbourhood's residents served as the basis for the remodelling of the square, with an accumulation of everyday objects (chairs, rubbish bins, bicycle racks, and a well with a pump) cast in patinated bronze, corroded cast iron, concrete and other coarse, rough, common materials. For Piotr Lewicki, of the architects' Biuro Projektow Lewicki Latak, 'the simple objects were a way to talk about the absence of one quarter of Krakow's inhabitants and an absence that is strictly connected to this place. The intervention aspires not to be a square with a monument, but to rather create an environment to commemorate the late Krakow inhabitants.' The design engages with the delicate balance of how to make it possible for the city's residents to live simultaneously in the past and the future.

**TEMPORARY LABORATORY**

The most controversial of the award winners is the Volkspalast project. The renovation of the East German GDR parliament building for temporary use, takes the politically fraught issue of creating new meanings in a site heavily weighted with past ideological terms head-on. The special societal significance of the building transformed the notion of public space for jury member Francis Rambert (director of IFA, Paris): 'Public space is not just open space, but it can be in the inside of a building that was bound to death, a reminder of an unpleasant past.'

With the Palaast unused for over 14 years and lined-up for demolition, the interdisciplinary Studio Urban Catalyst developed an initiative to transform the palace into a location that could accommodate a diverse cultural programme of concerts, art installations, music festivals, theatre, sport and leisure events. These projects constituted a temporary laboratory testing new forms of public space, interaction and communication to generate close proximities of different, otherwise segregated social and cultural

Facing page and this page:  
**ZwischenPalastNutzung / Volkspalast, Berlin, Germany, 2005 by Philipp Oswalt, Studio Urban Catalyst.**  
 Developer: Sophiensäle, HAU.



Top: **New Zgody Square, remodelling of the Bohaterów Getta Square, Krakow, Poland, 2005. By Piotr Lewicki and Kazimierz Latak**  
Developer: City of Krakow.

Above: **Morske orgulje/Sea organ, Zadar, Croatia, 2005 by Nikola Basic, architect.**  
Developer: Port authorities Zadar.

groups. While the architectural work actually realised in the building was extremely minimal and was concerned with the rather dry issues of safety, by awarding the project a special prize the jury recognised the role of temporary usage. As a facilitator and potential model of a new territory of action, temporary use sees architects acting less as builders and more as urban agents.

The jury members' acknowledgement of the Berlin intervention reveals a daring position challenging traditional notions of public space. But there are some gaps and the selection does expose the exclusion of many other social issues of contemporary architecture, for instance, sprawl, exurban, and suburban areas. #

**A selection of the designs, models, plans and other documentation of this year's and past award winners will be shown in an exhibition at the CCCB between June and September (dates to be confirmed). [www.cccb.org](http://urban.cccb.org/prize/) <http://urban.cccb.org/prize/>**

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