

European Union Prize
for Contemporary Architecture
Mies van der Rohe Award
2009



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Welfare Architecture: The Public Strikes Back

Fulvio Irace

The European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture – Mies van der Rohe Award, thanks to its 340 entries for the latest edition in 2009, is beyond doubt the most reliable and up-to-date observatory on the architecture status of the European Union. The experts and architects' associations who make the nominations, a jury that represents very different and varied cultures, and the Mies van der Rohe Foundation headquarters in Barcelona, provide a detailed x-ray of a landscape unified by a double (economic and social) destiny, but whose unification does not make it uniform and standardised in representing its needs and cultural traditions.

Talking about architecture 'Made in Europe' is not the same as talking about European architecture. Whereas the latter's typecast interpretation is found in the institutional buildings of its capitals – Strasbourg and Brussels – the reality of individual nations shows a wide variety of themes and solutions that abstracts any attempt to define the character of an alleged European identity.

This contrast is further strengthened by the rich architectural production of the most recent members of the European Union, whose switch from the collectivist economies of the past to the free market economies of today has released fresh energies that represent the undisputed novelty of the new European landscape. Characteristics such as: being accustomed to dealing with limited budgets; concern for social and welfare problems; and the rejection of monumental structures because of their pompous symbolism of an overwhelming and intrusive State; are mirrored in works offering a previously unseen fresh approach, which coupled with the ability to translate the practical issues of communities who are striving to improve their quality of life, is developing into a formally strong and incisive style.

The result is a truly refreshed and renovated portrait of architecture's role as a tool to modify and build new scenarios. After the last decade's euphoria, spectacularisation of construction and careless employment of unlimited budgets for highly scenographic works, the time has come for a return to architecture that is sensitive to social problems and is a means by which to solve needs, leading to the difficult passage from a reckless liberalist economy to a new set of rules in which the State resumes its key role.

An age of great expectations had left on the ground a handful of buildings with a great formal impact, in tune with a society in which transition from industrial to postindustrial looked like the easy transition to a society free from need and craving only entertainment and opulence. Today this age is over and the brilliant buildings that we saw in the past editions of the Prize seem removed witnesses of a world gone for good and that is very uncongenial to the new modern sensitivity.

The daunting formal performances and the astonishing technological prowess of ensembles like the BMW Welt in Munich or the Porsche Museum in Stuttgart in the 2009 Prize cycle are admirable examples. With respect to themes apparently more 'low key' or strictly functional in nature – like the Metal Recycling Plant in Otpad Pivka, Slovenia; the Water Filtration Plant in Sant'Erasmus, Venice; the Parking Garage in Coesfeld-Lette, Germany; La Rioja Technology Transfer Centre in Logroño, Spain; and the Nordpark Cable Railway in Innsbruck, Austria – it is possible to see the reflections of a modernity which, like at the turn of the 20th century, meditates about itself and about its role as a pacesetter for a new age.

This year's Prize was therefore able to capture all the signs of change and testify to the presence in Europe of a new design climate in which the citizen's welfare is becoming essential for architects again. Welfare is public by definition, it implies the proactive presence of the State as the key figure of transformation. This, in practice, means that the works commissioned to architects are collective works, community facilities, and social/welfare buildings that are managed by public institutions. All of this requires also the redefinition, now with a positive connotation, of the word 'collectivity' which had lost much of its value in the decades of global liberalism. The effects of this rebirth are evident, for example, in the revival of design projects related to housing and sustainability. On these issues, architectural research in the last quarter of a century had gone missing. The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century will be remembered for the birth and blooming of museums, the revival of iconic architecture, the abundance of concert halls and other leisure areas, and certainly not for new housing concepts or for the attention to urban mobility and transportation infrastructural systems.

But now the city demands, once again, the attention it deserves and the community, in particular, asks for measures and plans that emphasise the city's inherent character as a collective meeting place, until now devalued and hampered by the substantial privatisation of public space by shopping malls and consumerism-oriented leisure areas.

The five finalist projects, about which the Jury had an unanimous opinion, tell the story of these transformations, showing, as in the case of the Zenith Music Hall in Strasbourg, how even the topic of youth culture and music as a leisure activity may be part of a socially-oriented and aesthetically-elaborated plan, while proposing a new building type and an unusual iconography (a 'light' coliseum) for a building traditionally serialised in nature.

Most of the selected projects are dominated by a new concern for urbanity. Gone

are the isolated sculptures or landmarks planted in a wasteland, and in their place there are well-detailed projects that reconnect urban volumes, functions and spaces. The Oslo Opera House, with its emphasis on the idea of collective space; the Luigi Bocconi University that generously opens up its inside spaces to Milan; the Library, Senior Citizens' Centre and Public Space, featuring a courageous proposal of reoccupying an inner courtyard of a city block in Barcelona; and Nice's Tramway Terminal, a vital hub for a public transportation policy focused on the pedestrianisation of the city centre. All of them are harbingers of a return of the project to its original role of transformation, as a governance tool that helps the State, public institutions and administrations in carrying out their duties of respect and support for the community.

The Prize and the Emerging Architect Special Mention awarded to Lea Pelivan and Toma Plejić of STUDIO UP for the Gymnasium in Koprivnica, Croatia, represent the Prize's ability to understand the signs of change and to create a benchmark for monitoring the new agenda of architecture in Europe.

Depuratore San Erasmo

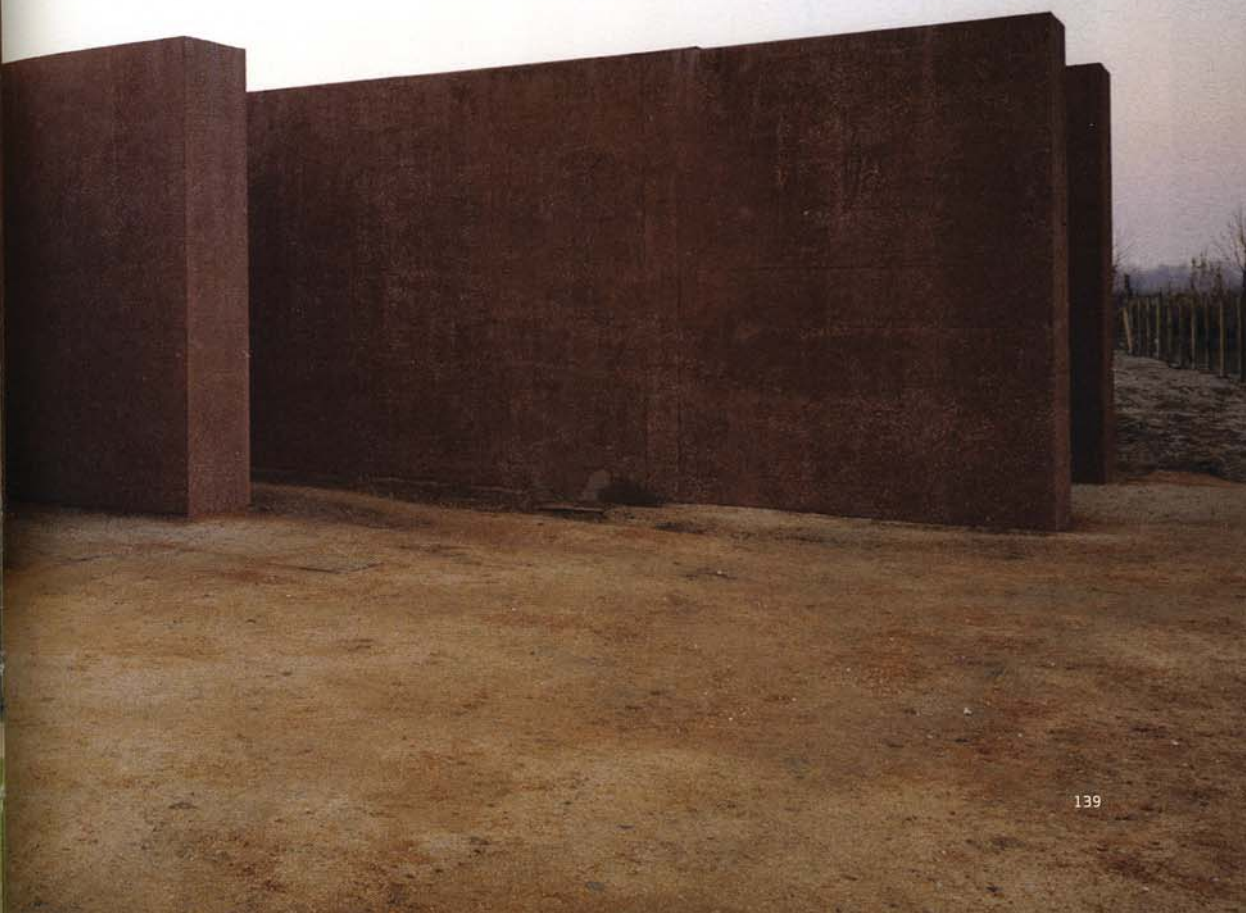


Sant'Erasmus Water Filtration Plant

Sant'Erasmus Island, Venice, Italy

Carlo Cappai, Maria Alessandra Segantini

G+S Associati



Sant'Erasmus is an island in the Venice lagoon where traces of historical fortifications still mark the landscape. The water filtration plant forms part of the urban and environmental programme to upgrade the island's infrastructure. A careful study of the purification process allowed for most of the plant to be buried underground and only the parts dedicated to maintenance and the removal of residual dusts needed to be constructed on the surface.

Much like the island's massive historical remains, four one-meter thick parallel walls built in red-coloured reinforced concrete mark the place. The spaces between the walls are closed by full-height louvred Iroko panels that provide ventilation and which can be opened to unload the dust. Although the building itself is off limits, by liberating the surface area a new public green space has been created – punctuated by the underground area's roof openings – and joins together with the existing park.



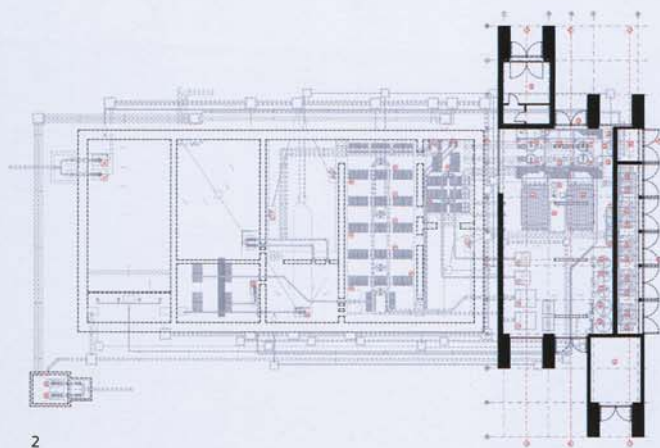
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