

Urban Maestro

New governance strategies
for Urban Design

EU Mies Award

EU Prize for Contemporary
Architecture

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	3
2. THE PRIZE, FROM THE START TO NOW	3
3. CASE STUDIES - WHAT THE PRIZE FOCUSES ON	5
3.1. Transformation of 530 Dwellings - Grand Parc Bordeaux.....	6
3.2. Skanderbeg Square.....	7
3.3. PC Caritas.....	9
4. NETWORK MANAGEMENT THROUGH THE PROCESS.....	11
5. KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT THROUGH DISSEMINATION.....	13
6. CONCLUSIONS.....	15

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture is a biennial prize awarded by the EU and Fundació Mies van der Rohe in Barcelona, in recognition of exceptional quality in architectural and urban design works across the continent. It also represents a network of organisations coming together to decide on these results and debate on the new ideas they might bring. Prize-winning works to date have put forward agendas of social, cultural, ecological or political change, always emphasising that architecture is, and must continue to be, a good of public interest.

2. THE PRIZE, FROM THE START TO NOW

The notion of a prize that would recognize and commend excellence in European architecture was first proposed to the European Parliament by its member Xavier Rubert de Ventós, who had published a series of works on the challenges of European identity. The point of reference for such a prize was the Barcelona Pavilion, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich in 1929 and considered a symbol of both architectural quality and socio-technological transformation.

The Barcelona Pavilion was reconstructed in 1986 coinciding with a formative period for the foundation of the European Union that would result in the eventual Maastricht Treaty of 1992 - this same period witnessed the signing of the Schengen Agreement (1985) and the establishment of the Erasmus Programme (1987). Within that context, the Pavilion was taken to signify a powerful message on a common architectural culture, building and uniting Europe. Based on that message, and with the aim of creating a European and international network, on 28 April 1987 European Commissioner Carlo Ripa di Meana and the Mayor of Barcelona Pasqual Maragall signed the agreement to launch a biennial architectural prize bearing the name of the Pavilion's most famous architect. Originally named the "Mies van der Rohe Award of the European Communities", the prize had gained the support of the then-European Economic Community, with its first edition held in 1988 as the "Mies van der Rohe Award for European Architecture". This support continued after the formal foundation of the EU, with the Prize eventually renamed to the "European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture - Mies van der Rohe Award", as it is still known today.

Architect Kenneth Frampton, first Chair of the Prize jury, wrote:

“For five hundred years our locus of the modern has been gravitating towards the West and, above all for the last century or so, towards an almost mythical New World. Now, quite suddenly, in a manner that uncannily corresponds to the approaching millennium, our idea of the modern is suffering a change and nothing seems now to be new, in the sense that it once was. In large measure, this is due to a constantly accelerating rate of change that increasingly renders every innovation obsolete before it has had a chance to become assimilated. The rapid techno-economic transformation has disconcerting implications at many levels, not least of which is the fact that the natural environment is beginning to break down under the impact of such rapacious development. This crisis has implication for architecture at many different levels and in part the Prize is oriented towards compensating, at a critical level, for the ecological and cultural disruptions caused by recent urban expansion and development. With the current upheavals in Eastern Europe, the emergence of the European Community as an independent political force and the promise of some form of continental federation by 1992, the star of the Old World is rising in both an economic and cultural sense”¹

Many of the challenges that Frampton pointed out in 1988 are still wholly pertinent today. In fact, recent editions of the Prize have responded to, and further promoted to the international stage, current debates on urban management strategies, underpinned by both theoretical principles and best practices. The two most recent winners of the Prize were both transformation projects involving 1960s-era apartment blocks, one in Amsterdam’s Bijlmer neighbourhood (2017) and the other in Bordeaux (2019), signalling a shift from previous editions. In the words of the then-Director for Culture and Creativity at the European Commission’s DG EAC, Michel Magnier, at the 2017 ceremony:

“In past years, the Prize went to what journalists call ‘iconic buildings’; museums, opera houses, concert halls etc. This time it took me some time to understand the jury’s choice. We are sending a strong message to policymakers and urban planners everywhere in Europe and perhaps even beyond”²

¹ Mies van der Rohe Award for European Architecture, 1990, Fundació Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona, p.10

² EU Mies Award Ceremony, Barcelona, 2017

This both follows and intensifies a mindset towards re-evaluating and transforming what Europe has already built, a mindset that is increasingly finding more followers amongst both designers and clients. One, perhaps small yet indicative effect of this message was the recent interest in regeneration displayed by Janet Sanz, Deputy Mayor for Ecology, Urban Planning and Mobility on the Barcelona City Council - who affirmed she has begun to “pull strings” to ascertain what regulatory changes would be necessary to facilitate the construction of balconies on older apartment blocks and other renovations of that kind (Ara, Dossier p.7, 26 April 2020).

With the help of the EU Mies Award's networking and dissemination actions, recently awarded and finalist projects - such as the ones detailed below as case studies - have demonstrated to relevant stakeholders across Europe that renovation and reuse can encompass much more than a mere technical improvement of façades. In the words of Mrs. von der Leyen, President of the European Commission,

“the necessary can also be beautiful”³

3. CASE STUDIES - WHAT THE PRIZE FOCUSES ON

Three entries from the 2019 edition of the Prize are presented below - the winner and two of the finalists. These are meant to illustrate the direction the Prize has been taking in recent years and the values it focuses on, hence the emphasis on the motivations behind each project and its associated process of creation, even as much if not more than the final result.

³ press statement on the New European Bauhaus, 14 October 2020

3.1. Transformation of 530 Dwellings - Grand Parc Bordeaux



Grand Parc Bordeaux by Lacaton & Vassal Architects, Frédéric Druot Architecture, Christophe Hutin Architecture © Philippe Ruault

CATEGORY: Housing and Renovation - Winner of the 2019 EU Mies Award

AUTHORS: Lacaton & Vassal Architects; Frédéric Druot Architecture; Christophe Hutin Architecture

THE SITE: three large blocks of flats from the 1960s in Bordeaux, France. 530 flats in total, mostly in the region of 40 m² each.

BACKGROUND: The three teams of architect had been collaborating for some time before this work and, most notably, in 2004 carried out a joint research project commissioned by the French Government's Ministry of Culture (Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication et la Direction de l'architecture et du patrimoine). The project, titled "PLUS - Les grands ensembles de logements – Territoire d'exception", looks at the large housing complexes dating from the 1960s/1970s and the recent major demolition programmes targeting them in order to alter the image of cities. In short, the project proposes that in light of current housing shortages and given the potential these large blocks hold (such as their structural, geographical, and spatial capabilities), they should be redesigned and transformed so as to meet current requirements for housing conditions rather than outright demolished.

PROCESS & PROJECT: In Bordeaux, the recommendations from that previous project found a fertile ground for practical experimentation. Existing regulations were used to allow for the built area to be expanded via 'winter gardens' for each

residency (an extension of the original façade), while at the same time removing the pre-existing asbestos and improving the energy efficiency of the buildings without the need for elements that would require regular replacement or maintenance (for example insulation layers or solar panels etc.). The original residents were not relocated, as often the case, but were able to remain in their homes.

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS: The success of this project was largely due to the creative and strategic thinking and foresight of the architects, and their ability to manage a complex process without forgetting the human dimension. Also crucial was the role of the public housing agency, the client, whose director was well aware of the previous PLUS research and trusted the architects by commissioning them to implement the findings of their previous research in this project.

3.2. Skanderbeg Square



Skanderbeg Square by 51N4E, Anri Sala, Plant en Houtgoed, iRI © Filip Dujardin

CATEGORY: Work in Other European Countries - Finalist for the 2019 EU Mies Award

AUTHORS: 51N4E; Anri Sala; Plant en Houtgoed; iRI

THE SITE: main square of the city of Tirana, Albania.

BACKGROUND: the square has had a long history following the country's transitions; most importantly, prior to its redesign, it was presented as a large urban void surrounded by the monumentality of Communist architecture.

PROCESS & PROJECT: It took many years and different collaborations between public and private stakeholders for the project to be completed. Formal and informal dialogue processes were established with local and central governmental departments as well as existing and future users. A large-scale model of the project was made accessible to the public and functioned as the focal point of the ongoing discussion on the project, facilitating further design improvements as well as fostering a sense of co-authorship among the people involved.

The execution of such a large-scale project presented particular challenges in a post-communist democracy that still has yet to reach maturity. The architects, 51N4E, had to coordinate a complex path navigating their way through the official permits and the financial and technical dimensions. In doing so, they recruited and supervised specialised contractors and consultants, both legal and technical, to oversee various aspects of the process. They also worked in close cooperation with the municipal authorities and assisted not only in the process of organising management of the project but also in revising and adapting local standards to those compatible with the EU (e.g. for material and application methods).

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS: The success of this project was clearly due to the specific capacity of the design team, which was selected via an international competition to cultivate trust, to engage stakeholders, and to propose common sense solutions. To achieve this, they developed a sophisticated dialogue framework involving local stakeholders, with the support of public authorities.

3.3. PC Caritas



PC Caritas by Architecten de Vylder Vinck Taillieu © Philip Dujardin

CATEGORY: Health and Care - Finalist for the 2019 EU Mies Award

AUTHORS: Architecten de Vylder Vinck Taillieu

THE SITE: Psychiatric Clinic Caritas in Melle, Belgium. Innovatively designed for its time, the complex fell into abandonment and faced gradual demolition.

BACKGROUND: Originally, the complex was conceived as a series of separate pavilions, one for each department, united through their architecture and the green spaces in between. Changes in technology and healthcare protocols meant that most of the pavilions were gradually abandoned and/or demolished to make way for newer, purely function-oriented buildings. Eventually, only a couple pavilions remained, and demolition was already underway when a new administration came in and called a halt to the works.

PROCESS & PROJECT: The new administration led a debate on the inherent value of the pavilions and their remains; could they lead to new healthcare practices? They put together a working team of doctors, therapists and patients and invited specialised architect Gideon Boie to supervise the process; the aim was to ascertain whether the existing construction programme could be reconfigured and whether it was possible to imagine a different space for therapy. Based on the information gathered, a call for entries in a public architectural competition was launched.

The winning entry was based on the principle of retaining the existing structure almost as it was, without replacing either the roof or interior elements that had already disappeared; carefully planned interventions made it possible to reuse the structure even without these elements. At the same time, a public space was configured, one open to exploration and modification according to the needs of both doctors and patients. This allowed the clinic staff to create knowledge and devise tools on how to plan based on what already exists, which then led to them being able to transform the interior of another neighbouring pavilion, one also in disuse but somewhat better maintained, with less deterioration. The project is not 'finished' in the conventional sense; it continues to adapt to the needs of its users.

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS: The attitude of the hospital director was key to the success of the intervention - particularly in the decisions to, firstly, stop the demolition works and, secondly, to involve a range of different stakeholders (doctors, patients and so on) as well as external experts (in a supervisory capacity) in the working process.

Smart design solutions, such as those exemplified in the above projects, have always been inseparable from smart clients - those who understand the benefits of thinking twice about proposals and allow the necessary time and conditions for that but, most importantly, those who remain continuously and actively involved. It is a fact that the success of these projects was, in large part, due to the dedication of various stakeholders (from designers to clients and beyond) who devoted their time and effort, much beyond what was formally required and even when not fully compensated financially. Good leadership and bringing the right team together are also essential, both in private and public bodies. Ultimately, the success or failure of such projects depends on not only the design itself or its execution, but also on the level of continuous maintenance and survey of their evolution.

Public competitions seem represent to be the best method for finding the right team - however, one key element that is often not adequate is how the rules of such competitions should be established. When, for example, what matters are only the financial aspects or previous experience, then the results are often underwhelming if not outright mediocre.

Inter-disciplinary work is also crucial. Historically, architects were always assisted by specialists - from artists, historians or sociologists to engineers and the workers themselves. This is no less essential today - pooling efforts and remembering that

everyone plays a role alongside making use every group's expertise should all be taken into account.

The winners and finalists of the EU Mies Award are exemplary in this regard, from infrastructures made in conjunction with engineers to iconic buildings that were the result of unexpected collaborations - like the Neues Museum in Berlin, for which the architect, David Chipperfield, opened an office in the city and worked with Julian Harrap, a specialist in historic buildings and landscapes. This has been increasingly the case in recent years, where the roles of the users and demographic changes have a much more important place in achieving dynamic and sustainable spaces.

A key function of the EU Mies Award is highlighting these aspects and encouraging others to follow in the footsteps of awarded projects, not just in terms of design results but also, crucially, in terms of processes and attitudes. The Prize is, therefore, structured in such a way that it emphasises networking and promotion, in order to steer, encourage and allow for better architectural design throughout Europe. The structure of the whole organisation can be understood in two dimensions: network and knowledge management.

4. NETWORK MANAGEMENT THROUGH THE PROCESS

Three bodies are responsible for the organisation of the Award, with the support of the European Commission: Fundació Mies van der Rohe, the City of Barcelona and an Advisory Committee consisting of the following European institutions:

Architekturzentrum Wien, Vienna; **Danish Architecture Centre**, Copenhagen; **DESSA Gallery**, Ljubljana; **German Architecture Museum**, Frankfurt; **Fundació Mies van der Rohe**, Barcelona; **Hungarian Contemporary Architecture Centre**, Budapest; **Cité de l'Architecture et du patrimoine**, Paris; **Museum of Architecture**, Wrocław; **Museum of Estonian Architecture**, Tallinn; **Museum of Finnish Architecture**, Helsinki; **Museum of Architecture and Design**, Ljubljana; **National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design**, Oslo; **RIBA**, London; **The Berlage**, Delft; and **Triennale di Milano**, Milan. The Committee is responsible for the major decisions, such as the composition of the jury, the selection of experts and any necessary changes to improve efficiency at any time.

The Advisory Committee meets in person once a year and a permanent digital contact is established. Once the appropriate decisions for each edition of the Prize

have been made and agreed upon with the European Commission's Creative Europe programme, the Prize Rules are announced and contact is made with all of the European Architects' Associations in the countries submitting Prize entries (https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/creative-europe/library/eligibility-organisations-non-eu-countries_en) alongside a group of independent experts, who are tasked with nominating newly-built works from the last two years that they consider to adhere to the values enshrined in the Prize's Rules. Once these nominations are received, they are discussed with the Advisory Committee to review relevant works that may have been overlooked and, if applicable, up to 20 more nominations will be added.

This network-based organisation allows the Prize to reach and scour the length and breadth of Europe, while the periodic change in experts facilitates the Prize's emphasis on transparency and fairness, given that the jury, which consists of seven members, is changed at every edition of the Prize.

Nominees put forward by national architects' associations and the expert pool are contacted by Fundació Mies van der Rohe and all relevant information is cross-checked for accuracy before the relevant material is shared with the jury. Selection criteria for the jury members include gender and age diversity, geography, field of knowledge (practising architects, theorists and critics, other related fields such as sociology or journalism, clients and European vision in a global context) and experience with architectural debate and discourse. Members of the jury are asked to have sufficient time to review the works digitally, to make contributions to the debate (be it oral, written, with members of the jury, with users and clients, etc.), to meet four days in-person with other members of the jury, and to be available for a one-week trip to visit a set of five or six works that the jury itself has shortlisted.

This process allows a solid foundation to be built, on which a debate on each nomination's contribution can be launched. The Prize rules are always the reference point, but at the same time, sufficient scope is allowed for jury members to debate and come to a joint final decision. The jury finally gives a decision on two works: one by an established architectural firm and another by a younger upcoming one. In parallel, in alternating years, an independent jury decides on the Young Talent Architecture Award, bestowed on the best graduation projects at European architecture schools. Therefore, the Prize encompasses not only the geographical range of Europe but also the range of architects' careers from the very beginnings to the developmental years and the subsequent peak.

5. KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT THROUGH DISSEMINATION

For the Prize to be an effective non-regulatory (informal) tool for improving the quality of the built environment, results at various stages must be shared with the public and communicated to expert audiences. Therefore, various dissemination activities are included in the structure of the Prize, starting from the very early stages:

- Biennial group of between 350 and 400 high-quality works at the European level, built in the two years prior to each edition of the Prize;
- Selection of 40 particularly noteworthy works, of which four are highly relevant and two others are deemed to have reached levels of excellence;
- A platform for public presentation, celebration and debate through the EU Mies Award Day (presentation of works by the authors, roundtables with promoters and experts, exhibition of the 40 shortlisted works and the prize-giving ceremony);
- EU Mies Award – Architecture Days in which visits to nominated works are organised throughout Europe;
- Creation of an archive with documents that include drawings, photographs, videos, texts and models and an open online database;
- Curation of exhibitions in various formats around the world;
- Publication of books/catalogues of the exhibitions;
- Organisation of debates and participation in similar discussions organised by others;
- Creation of a continuous impetus or driving force that highlights the importance of architecture, landscaping and urban planning as well as the support of the European Union.

Numerous people are involved in each edition of the EU Mies Award and the YTAA. From all the conversations and debates held, topics are drawn that are analysed in greater depth and disseminated through interviews, textbooks, online videos, exhibitions and debates.

All works are posted on the websites eumiesaward.com and ytaaward.com as a form of open consultation. Nominees are also featured in an app with the same name as the award, which allows anyone to locate and delve deeper into examples of high-calibre architecture. All these works are also analysed for, and curated in, a specialised publication accompanying each edition of the Prize.

Physical experience with architecture is essential to better understand its values and the EU Mies Award – Architecture Days facilitates visits to the Prize’s nominated works throughout Europe for all those who wish to gain a more in-depth insight and exchange opinions with the project authors. During the EU Mies Award Day, clients, architects and policy-makers, as well as the interested public, gather in the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion in Barcelona (when the city simultaneously celebrates Barcelona Architecture Week and the Barcelona Building Construmat trade fair) and openly discuss the strategies followed that have proven effective and that can be implemented in an adapted manner to different contexts as well as those that have produced less satisfactory results. Thus, exchanges progressively unfold at different levels that also turn out to be tools for the development of soft policies to improve the quality of our environment.

When physical experience is not possible, exhibitions become the main tool to make architecture accessible to everyone and, on the basis of an archive that, to date, includes 3,618 built projects, 1,556 fundamentally theoretical proposals, more than 500 scale models as well as videos, texts and interviews, exhibitions can be created that are tailored to even exacting requirements. Examples include the “Made in Europe” exhibition, held in Barcelona, Venice, Shanghai, Milan and Wroclaw on contemporary European architecture between 1988 and 2013; “Spanish Architectures”, held in Madrid on Spanish architecture in the EU Mies Award; “Polish Architectures”, held in Katowice and Warsaw on Polish architecture in the EU Mies Award; “Architectures on the Waterfront”, on the recent transformation of sea- and riverfronts throughout Europe and held at the Barcelona Maritime Museum; and “Large scale transformation: a new challenge for sustainability” at the Cité de l’architecture et du patrimoine in Paris on the transformation of housing blocks built after the IIGM, in parallel with the travelling biennial exhibitions of each edition of the EU Mies Award and YTAA.

All these debates and conversations in different formats have been created as a centripetal force from which everything that has taken place in Europe can adhere. As a catalyst, the Prize produces a centrifugal force that broadens the debate throughout Europe and beyond, with the intention of reaching those who can transform soft policies into tools for improving the built environment.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Architecture is still largely absent from formal legislation in Europe but, when it does appear (e.g. France 1977/2016, Catalonia 2017), it does so as a 'public good' or good 'of public interest'. Establishing built environment quality in such a manner is one of the most important 'soft power' policies that, in some places, has already found its way into 'hard power' or legal documents, with the result being that it should be highly interesting to follow the course of how that evolves.

In that sense, the process and network of the EU Mies Award and the consequent strategies aimed at dissemination present an innovative way to transform the European landscape. Links between hard and soft power are stimulated via the Award and, although the context of each case is different, common lessons are extracted and shared through the established network. From theoretical projects to constructed ones, from first perceptions to in-depth analyses, from individuals to institutions and policy-makers and from consolidated regulations to informal tools, in all cases, the knowledge is shared and all works participating in the EU Mies Award are encouraged to leverage every challenge they are confronted with in order to take a step forward and understand the original values of what we have while conferring it with added value.

If we should only point to one lesson learnt from the history of the EU Mies Award, it would be the key role of attitude as a game-changer. Not only that of the design team, but, more importantly, the attitude of the client; where being open-minded and trusting in the creative power of architecture can lead to truly meaningful results. It is the aim of the Awards to help influence more clients, whether they be public or private, to embrace that mindset and allow design teams to provide innovative, thoughtful solutions to pressing urban problems.

The EU Mies Award helps to cultivate a culture of better design across Europe by highlighting innovative works and showcasing to policymakers and politicians what architecture can do for the most pressing current problems when allowed the right circumstances. Unlike other awards, as it is the official European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture, the EU Mies Award manages to effectively reach an audience beyond the mere architectural sphere - an audience in the position of making decisions on the economic and regulatory fields. If real changes are to be enacted, a design culture needs to be promoted amongst those traditionally outside of the 'architectural bubble' - and the EU Mies Award is one of the key methods of doing that at the European level.

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URBAN MAESTRO

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