

PRIX W 2008

EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURE COMPETITION

Enhancement of a water tower site in Latina, Italy.

REFLEXIONS OF THE JURY REGARDING THE PRIX W IDEAS COMPETITION PROCESS

Participating in an architecture competition is surely, for a young architect, the best opportunity to get a project developed. An idea competition is, among all the possible kind of contests, the most evocative, even though it is not always followed by the development of the project.

The competition organised by the Wilmotte Foundation for the past 3 years is aimed at young architects. Its main mission consists, as an ideas competition, in suggesting new notions balancing fantasy and rationality, so as to understand to which extent the idea developed by the author can be implemented, while adapting to the users' requirements and triggering a constructive dialogue with the client.

This competition intends to give the local administration, which will make the final choice, an important documentation they can refer to. The 200 projects, whose dreamlike dimension was filtered out, constitute a useful database that can be consulted to obtain a final project in compliance with the client's needs.

The Latina's Water tower ideas competition is a very interesting case study. The city of Latina was created to "restore" an environmental situation hostile to the presence of men, on a swampy land which conditioned its existence. Latina's first water towers, which were essential to the community's life 70 years ago, referred to the architectural forms of the time and, in some cases, to the Roman monumentality. Other towers were added afterwards with more essential forms and some of them, as is the case for the water tower of the Prix W, may be considered "exhibitionist" of their own function. This building from the seventies signals an interesting area. It epitomises a historic movement characterized by the influence of new materials and techniques offered to architects and engineers; an icon representative of its own existence which led, eventually, to the cancelling of the tower in its functional aspect, which had become disturbing. When it was created, Latina could consider itself as a horizontal icon, as expressed in its original plan.

A true answer that opposes the “icon” apology that has recently appeared in the urban world, did not emerge out of the competition, even though we identified, in some projects (mentioned or not), some interesting options worth developing.

The main task, for an architectural jury, consists in assessing the feasibility of the project: functionality and architectural quality, without forgetting the economic relationship between quality and costs.

Through the analysis of the projects presented, it is clear that most of them belonged to the “non feasible” category from a technical and economic point of view. A small part of the projects, for not dealing with the structure of the tower, was not offering any convincing and constructible solutions.

Two schools of thought emerged, two different approaches to the problem’s solution. Some included the tower with profound mimetic transformations erasing the original image while the other ones left the tower untouched, offering architectural additions you could hardly identify. The jury’s deliberations, which reflect the extreme diversity and dissonance of the proposals, oriented the decision towards projects which best combined both approaches.

The two “families” of architectural proposals were re-examined, afterwards, while trying to emphasize these main values. The selected project represents, in this regard, a solution which can be defined as a mediator between the two tendencies: the tower maintained in its structural essence with a building on the side, a rational architectural form sprinkled with a quasi ironic touch, a non consumed wedding with the object maintained in its original integrity.

The goal of this competition is not to pretend that a solution was found to solve the “what to do” problem with an icon many people dislike; we do not want to formulate rules out of it -something virtually impossible in this context- but we tend to encourage some principles which always lead to the respect of the authenticity of the architecture and urban buildings and the promotion of compatible additions, vertical or horizontal, that can maintain the existing harmony or modify and improve it in a peaceful collaboration spirit. This constitutes the architect’s pledge and responsibility while giving life to the administration’s innovative ideas.

Lastly, this competition’s contribution must guide the administration towards the implementation of additional volumes, be they subterranean or emerging, thought by considerate architects who know how to position themselves in the environment on the basis of a precise technical and economic program.

Furthermore, an analysis -even a basic one- of the construction costs of the projects previously rejected by the technical commission of the jury due to macroscopic construction deficiencies, can guide the administration’s choices towards alternative solutions in compliance with the operational requirements of the water company, without neglecting a better environmental inclusion.

A very interesting and current debate could arise from this competition and the material produced. Many debates, on the international scene, lead to the fundamental issue: the graft of contemporary architecture in historic centres in respect with the environment.

Similar passionate debates fuelled by strong beliefs are currently taking place in Italian largest cities. The icons are usually oriented upwards - although the urban skylines, mostly horizontal, facilitate the harmonization with the natural context - and provoke, as such, incurable contrasts.

The best projects will be published. This publication will represent an important contribution for the opening of a constructive dialogue between the projects' authors and the clients, at the very moment when the ideas expressed through the competition will have to be implemented. Their realization shall represent, for Latina, an ideal continuation of its recent origin, whose urban and architectural premises consisted in the creation of an environment which promoted a quality of life adapted to the nature of the agricultural life, which, today, although times have changed, rediscovers itself and wants to get better. Latina can still, indeed, improve itself with forms more respectful of the existing architectural and environmental context.

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