

Two Low-Key Young Architects With an Attitude, a Vision and Now a Prize

A kaleidoscopic crimson canopy wins a competition.

By ROBIN POGREBIN

In an era that celebrates big-name architects and multimillion-dollar building projects, Gaston Nogues and Benjamin Ball offer a change of pace. One wears siren-red Converse sneakers, the other a beatnik fedora and goatee; their studio is a three-car garage in the Echo Park section of Los Angeles that is taken up mostly by building tools. Neither has yet turned 40.

That low-key business may change now that they have been anointed the winners of the Young Architects Program competition, held annually by P.S. 1 in Queens and the Museum of Modern Art. The seven-year-old program, in which architects submit proposals to transform the P.S. 1 courtyard into an outdoor musical performance and party space, goes a long way toward advancing a budding reputation.

Triumphing over the four other finalists, Mr. Nogues and Mr. Ball designed a kaleidoscopic crimson canopy of reinforced Mylar laminate, with wooden utility poles and cargo netting, that suggests nothing so much as the jeweled innards of a hacked-open pomegranate.

"Imagine a Felliniesque, low-tech circus tent with the canvas replaced by hallucinogenic red, orange and amber silicon scales," said Alanna Heiss, the director of P.S. 1. "It seemed to us East Coast people really a present from the wilderness of California dreams."

As always, each team competing in the program must work within a tight budget (\$70,000), limited square

footage (15,000) and a short timetable; they now have three months to build their creation. Opening day is June 21.

In an interview on Thursday afternoon, a few hours after being notified of their victory, Mr. Ball and Mr. Nogues, both 38 — along with Paul Endres, their engineer, 43 — were playing it cool but also clearly eager to get down to work on their fantastical setting.

"We saw it as the opportunity to create something that is — what

would be the word? — spectacular," Mr. Ball said.

Mr. Nogues added, "Spectacular and psychedelic."

Under the competition rules, the architects must provide shade, water and seating. The dome they fashioned is made of a material resembling theatrical light gels and tinted "kind of a marmalade rust," Mr. Ball said. They wanted the color to reflect well on the visitors gyrating under-

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neath.

"We're essentially creating an outdoor daytime nightclub," he said. "If you put greens or purples or blues on people's skin, they tend to look ghoulish."

Mr. Nogues agreed: "Sick."

So-called drench buckets suspended in the air will periodically dump water on patrons below. Sprinklers will also send water cascading down through the canopy. For seating, the team came up with nets suspended in tripods, like community hammocks.

The architects say they would like to see people post bills on the utility poles. "Upcoming V.J. shows, lost-cat posters," Mr. Nogues said. "It's a means of connection, in a way." Asked if P.S. 1 had approved that idea, he acknowledged, "We didn't quite put it in the presentation."

In the design process they relied on several different software programs and constructed numerous models (Mr. Nogues said 20 to 30; Mr. Ball said, whoa, it was more like 12) and enlisted many volunteers to help them.

"Two of the guys flew to L.A. and spent their spring break in a sweaty studio in Echo Park," Mr. Ball said. "I see projects like this as a bit like making an independent film. You rely on people's enthusiasm and belief in the project, and because P.S. 1 gives you a lot of rope to do what you want to do, that freedom is worth a lot to people."

The architects plan to construct as much as they can at their California studio, then ship it to New York. This could be costly, of course, and they have to come in on budget. (They also got an honorarium of \$15,000.)

But Mr. Ball and Mr. Nogues, who joined forces in 2004, are used to working on a shoestring and making structures that are not meant to last. Last summer they turned to sewing techniques — patterning, sewing, draping — to create a one-night stage set for the opening gala of "Skin and Bones: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture," an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Guests walked a runway to dinner through a swirling array of last year's T-shirts, polo shirts and flannel pajamas.

For Tiffany & Company's formal introduction of jewelry and accessories designed by the architect Frank Gehry in 2005, Ball-Nogues reimagined a closed section of Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, designing walls, furniture and bars. One structure, curved like the human body, was constructed from 4,000 layers of corrugated cardboard sandwiched together. Live naked models wearing



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the Gehry jewelry were framed by peep-show-type display windows inspired by Marcel Duchamp's "Étant Donnés."

"We do work that's based on creating an environment for people to interact with other people," Mr. Nogues said. "For people to have a good time in."

Mr. Nogues worked for Mr. Gehry for 10 years. Mr. Ball was once a set and production designer, working on the "Matrix" films, music videos and

commercials. They met in the early 1990s while studying at the Southern California Institute of Architecture.

"They are contributing to a medium that is not quite architecture and not quite installation art," said Sylvia Lavin, a professor in the architecture and design department at the University of California, Los Angeles, who nominated them for the competition.

Perhaps needless to say, the pair do not make a lot of money on the

kinds of architecture they have been doing, and they continue to take side jobs, like building architectural models for other firms.

"We're scrappy," Mr. Nogues said.

Mr. Ball added, "And we're really poor."

But they're not complaining. Nor are they concerned about how they will afford New York housing in the final stages of this project.

"We're going to pitch a tent," Mr. Ball said. "In the P.S. 1 courtyard."



The architects Benjamin Ball, left, and Gaston Nogues, with the engineer Paul Endres, and the design that won Mr. Ball and Mr. Nogues the Young Architects Program competition. Photographs by Julien Jourden for The New York Times