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I.D.

52nd Annual Design Review

Environments / Moderated by Tom Vanderbilt

The word “environment” encompasses a spectrum of meanings. It can refer to our surroundings as a whole, or the confines of Herzog & de Meuron’s new soccer stadium in Munich, or even a cocoon of personal enjoyment as one walks down a city street, absorbed in an iPod playlist.

This year’s jury, composed of Michael Arad, Elizabeth Diller, and Lindy Roy, cast an inclusive eye on just what makes an environment—and what makes it good. Size, budget, and permanence are not necessarily the most crucial variables. “The recent Olympic opening, that was an environment,” said Arad, “one that was created through fireworks and circumstance and costumes and flags.” For Roy, “an environment is about experience—the ones we responded to had some kind of translation over time.” Indeed, the two projects that won the highest accolades, Maximilian’s Schell and the Pittsburgh Children’s Museum, were not architectural projects per se, but rather outdoor environmental sculptures. Each used materials in an unexpected way to create spaces that reacted to the larger “environment” of wind, light, and weather.

The gulf in size between the two projects—a temporary space in a small residential lot in Los Angeles and a large public art building in Pittsburgh—prompted a bit of soul-searching among the jurors. “Big permanent project or fanciful temporary structure?” is how Roy posed the choice. “The ambitions are both high. This one’s better executed in a way,” said Diller, referring to the Schell, “but it’s autonomous. The museum is connected to a whole lot of stuff; its complexity factor is much higher.” Arad, meanwhile, championed “the idea that you can do something remarkable

in a small space with a small budget. If we had seen a superlative bus stop, I would have said that could be the number-one selection for this category.”

Alas, no bus stops finished among the top entries. Projects that won honors, however, truly ranged in scale and price, from splashy big-name corporate headquarters to obscure conceptual works. Many designers seemed to take technology as their muse, either through strategies of responsive interaction or the fractal complexities now achieved through processes such as CNC fabrication. What the jury ranked highest, though, was the strength of an original idea and the fortitude to carry it through to completion. Beauty or seamless perfection was deemed insufficient on its own. “I think we’re fatigued by all the really sleek projects; we’ve seen them before,” said Arad. “It’s great that this kind of aesthetic is embraced by a larger audience, but it’s all surface and has nothing to it.” In other words, it’s one thing to fashion a stylish restaurant, but another to create an inflatable portable amphitheater inspired by the California orange. “Each of these projects has its own set of rules or language,” said Arad, inspecting the winners, “whether it’s the pneumatic Hot White Orange—which is kind of a ridiculous project but takes the concept all the way and really expands on it—or the Defibrillator lighting and video installation, which is very skillful at doing one thing.”

Maximilian's Schell

Inspired by the least likely of references—legendary actor Maximilian Schell's appearance in the Disney 1970s sci-fi cult classic *The Black Hole*—Los Angeles architects Benjamin Ball and Gaston Nogués created, in the summer of 2005, a “vortex” between two Spanish-colonial houses in Silver Lake. (The project was a temporary installation at the Materials & Applications art gallery, and its short-lived nature presumably obviated the need for building inspectors to see if vortices were permitted under local zoning code.)

Fashioned from a scaly assemblage of 504 CNC-milled parametric Mylar petals, riveted together and reinforced with bundled nylon and Aramid fibers, Maximilian's Schell is a swirling, shade-providing canopy pitched over an improvised outdoor social and performance space. It drew visitors as through gravity toward the “singularity” of its vortex and animated the entire space through crystalline mutations of available light.

The jury responded not only to the installation's technological bravura, but also to the integrity of its realization. “So often projects that come out of CAD are all over the place,” Arad observed. “This one has a nice geometry underlying it, and an order and a hierarchy I appreciate.” He also liked that the structure wasn't based on architectural smoke and mirrors. “Usually in those translations everybody relies on rods and a second armature to create that blobby space.”

Diller, too, was struck by the form. “What seems different here is that the structure is on the petal; the material has enough elasticity to provide the form but also be self-structuring.”

In the end, Maximilian's Schell was able to beguile the jury as much as it seduced Angelenos. “It's funny because it's a light funnel but it's also a shade. It's like a Klein Bottle,” said Arad, referring to a cousin of the Möbius strip. The colors and materials had him reaching for another comparison, perhaps more befitting of the Los Angeles sunshine. “It reminds me of a pair of Gucci glasses.”

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 DESIGN Ball-Nogués (Los Angeles): Benjamin Ball, Gaston Nogués, principals
 CLIENT Materials & Applications (Los Angeles)
 MATERIAL Reinforced Mylar film
 SOFTWARE TopSolid, VectorWorks Architect, Easy NT

Q+A with Benjamin Ball, Ball-Nogués

Considering the number of modestly scaled architectural installations out there, yours has sure gotten a lot of notice: nice write-up in *The New York Times*, top dog in this review. Are you surprised?

We were so involved with getting the piece up we didn't think too much about the press's reaction. We were more concerned that the neighbors didn't complain and the building department didn't bust us for not approaching them regarding the possible need for a permit. We also worried that the reflection from the “singularity” might have the ability to roast hot dogs in somebody's bedroom across the canyon. But we're pleased with the amount of attention we've received.

What was the brief exactly?

M&A hosts two or three installations a year that investigate landscape and architecture. The director, Jenna Didier, and I share an interest in Frei Otto's work, and Jenna originally suggested we mount some kind of built exploration of Otto's ideas. This dovetailed nicely with work we were already doing on using parametric tiling across minimal surfaces.

How many people look at you with delight and wonder upon hearing the name Maximilian's Schell because they admired Schell's performance in *Judgment at Nuremberg*?

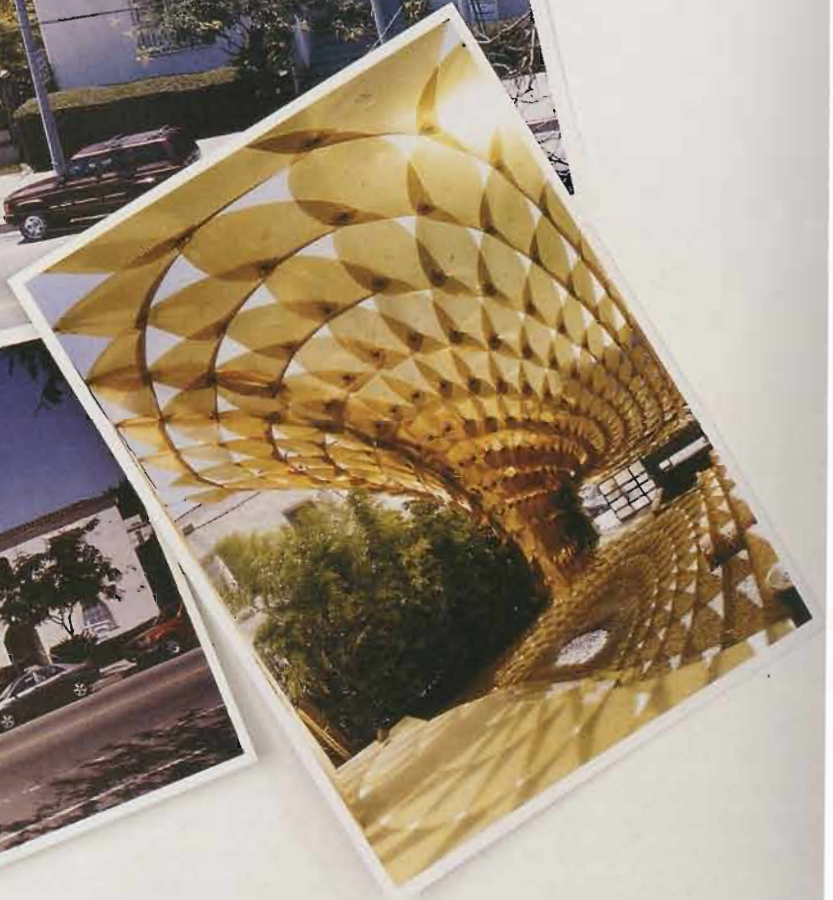
Why do you think we chose gold, the color of the Oscar? It was to commemorate his Academy Award-winning performance in that movie. However, we found Schell's portrayal of Doctor Hans Reinhardt in *The Black Hole* to be infinitely more inspiring: He was a man obsessed with a mad vision of making a plunge into the unknown.

How long did it take you to rivet together the 504 Mylar petals composing the structure?

We assembled everything by hand, and the riveting was done by a group of very focused friends: The structure fits together only one way, like a puzzle. After thorough planning, we managed to accomplish the process in about two weeks.

Were there any notable experiences that took place in the Schell that you would care to share?

I heard that M&A's technical director, Oliver Hess, had to politely request that a couple of late-night visitors put on their clothes and leave within five minutes.



Best of Category



Lindy Roy

Lindy Roy is the founder of Roy Co., a six-year-old New York City architecture studio whose major projects include Vitra's U.S. headquarters, Hotel QT in Times Square, L'Oréal's Living Labs, the Okavango Delta Spa in Botswana, and High Line 519, an 11-story residential building on the west side of Manhattan that's currently under construction. Roy was part of a group of architects commissioned by *The New York Times Magazine* to reconceptualize the World Trade Center site and was also named a finalist in that magazine's Times Capsule competition. In 2001, Roy was the winner of the MoMA/P.S.1 Young Architects Competition and a winner of 16 Houses, a Houston competition seeking high-concept designs for affordable housing prototypes. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Vogue*, *I.D.*, *Surface*, *Frame*, and *Blueprint*, among others, and it has been exhibited at MoMA, London's Design Museum, the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center. In 2003, Roy received a solo exhibition entitled "ROY/Design Series 1" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Born in Cape Town, South Africa, she has a Bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Cape Town and a Master's degree in architecture from Columbia University.



Michael Arad

Michael Arad joined New York City-based Handel Architects as a partner in April of 2004. His design for the World Trade Center site memorial, "Reflecting Absence," was chosen by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation in January 2004. In 2006, Arad was one of six recipients of the AIA Young Architects Award, which honors architects licensed for 10 years or less "who have shown exceptional leadership and made significant contributions to the profession early in their careers." Prior to winning the WTC competition, Arad worked as an architect for the New York City Housing Authority. He also spent three years with Kohn Pedersen Fox, where he worked on several major projects, including Union Station Tower, a mixed-use 108-story skyscraper in Hong Kong, and Espirito Santo Plaza, a 37-story tower in Miami that won an AIA New York Chapter Design Award Citation in 2001. Arad received a B.A. from Dartmouth College in 1994 and a Master's degree in architecture from the Georgia Institute of Technology in 1999. He served in the Israeli military from 1988 to 1991, in the reconnaissance unit of an infantry brigade.



Elizabeth Diller

Elizabeth Diller is a principal of Diller Scofidio + Renfro, an interdisciplinary studio that fuses architecture, visual arts, and performing arts. Current projects in New York City include the Lincoln Center renovation and the master plan and architectural design of the High Line. DS+R is also the architect for the redevelopment of Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens, the world's first amusement park, and for the Institute of Contemporary Art, a 65,000-square-foot building in Boston that will be completed in September 2006. Recently completed projects include the Blur Building, a media pavilion commissioned for Swiss EXPO 02, the Ground Zero viewing platforms constructed immediately after 9/11, and the design for Eyebeam Museum of Art & Technology in New York City, which was featured in the 2002 and 2004 Venice Architecture Biennales. Diller founded Diller + Scofidio with Ricardo Scofidio in 1979; Charles Renfro, a collaborator in the studio since 1997, was promoted to partner in 2004. Diller and Scofidio are recipients of the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship; theirs was the first awarded in the field of architecture. She is a professor of architecture at Princeton University.