

Jury citation

This is the inaugural year of the Czech Architecture Awards, introduced by the Czech Chamber of Architects. Over 400 projects completed within the last five years from nearly every region of the Czech Republic were submitted, ranging from private houses to offices, public projects to cultural buildings, and education programmes to regeneration projects, all of which have been reviewed by a specially assembled Jury of architects and designers.

This is a brave and forward thinking programme which aims to bring to the public theatre a critical debate focused on the demand for excellence within the construction industry. Even braver is that the Jury for this special prize has been assembled from an international stage of many European states; Holland, Germany, Slovakia, Belgium, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Spain, in turn opening the debate to a wider international audience beyond the borders of the host country.

It is of particular note however, that through an extensive judging process resulting with a shortlist of eight finalists including unanimous winner, non of the projects featured were built within the capital city, Prague. This suggests a broad depth of architectural endeavour for this country with an ambition to build high quality work but also raises worrying trends for a city which sees an intensity of many contemporary urban issues.

As part of a three day trip, the Jury travelled the length and breadth of the Czech Republic to interrogate the architects and owners of projects for historical centres, projects in landscape settings, projects for domestic clients, regeneration and renovation projects. However it is also worrying to note an absence of meaningful projects managing the wider social concerns of mass housing or schools within urban settings. A trend the jury hopes is reversed in subsequent years of this prestigious award.

By its definition, this award programme seeks to make no distinction between scale, typology or programme, but instead challenges the select Jury to reach agreement on a single project, that in its opinion, transcends all others in its conception and execution. Accordingly, as part of the architectural odyssey, the Jury has seen projects across many scales and typologies. In response to this broad selection of work, the Jury's assessment by necessity has been defined by a self imposed set of criteria, being; complexity, richness, climate, efficiency, adaptability, context, history, consistency and above all the desire to find that 'special something', a thing which elevates the really good to something exceptional.

The intention of this award programme is to seek out and reward the most successful architectural projects completed within the Czech Republic. For the Jury, successful architecture responds to the conditions defined by a carefully curated programmatic brief. Architects cannot make good architecture if a society cannot articulate its problems and requirements. This is a problem which goes beyond the immediate culture of 'architecture' but is one defined by the society within which the architect is working; an awareness this important programme seeks to inspire.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of this programme, the Jury is also to be guided by its own conscience. There are many aspects of the programme therefore which suggest reason for reflection. As an international Jury many pressing matters and difficulties were encountered. Perhaps most significantly, the architectural culture of the Czech Republic was felt not to be international in outlook or makeup, a factor reflected by a lack of representation of architects outside of the Czech Republic and demonstrated by a lack of projects included on the submission list by non domestic architects. Equally there appeared to be a distinct lack of the culture of collaborative work. The Jury also hopes to see this trend addressed in subsequent years.

But returning to the prize, the Jury wishes to reflect on why a specific project was a winner and why a number of projects did not win. Whilst all projects on the final list represented a high achievement, one project, above all others, stood out; the Zen – houses, Studio and House, Liberec. A simple, economic and unassuming project, it is characterised by its site specificity, its site responsiveness, its uniqueness, its unrelenting ambition to challenge and its confidence to make mistakes in trying. This is a stand out project for 2016. A scheme with real ambition testing the boundaries and delivering the exemplar.

The Jury congratulates Zen –houses, Studio and House as the winner of the 2016 Czech Architecture Awards.

Selected Shortlist

1. The Gahur's Prospect Revitalisation - Front space of the Cultural and University Centre; Zlín

This was considered by the jurors to be an outstanding response to a number of site specific urban challenges. By emphatically connecting the university to adjacent local amenities across a well established undulating green space, It demonstrates the importance of a considered attitude when modifying public space through its simplicity of concept and design. It therefore creates a positive impact and a continuum of the historic structure of local public spaces, in turn hiding new desire lines below visual datums.

2. Krkonose Mountains Centre Environmental Education; Vrchlabí

The special quality, ambition and execution of this project is remarkable, in turn illustrating the positive influence that the architect can exert upon the construction phase of a project. Nevertheless, the jury consider that as architects, we should embrace the challenges imposed by the need to build contemporary structures within historic settings, not by concealment but by a more direct engagement between the old and the new.

3. Revitalisation of the Castle Hill; Litomyšl

The initial response to this site and programme, was ultimately challenged during the construction phase, once historically important archaeological conditions were exposed. The resultant site constraints forced the client and architect to re-appropriate the extant site strategy with a fully comprehensive solution combining a new internal programme with a remodelled surrounding streetscape; a single and measured gesture responding to a range of complex programmatic and contextual constraints through minimal means.

4. Lower Vítkovice Area; Ostrava

In this project the worlds of industry, culture and education combine in a new dynamic format, one which creates a new and viable alternative identity for the post industrial city of Ostrava Vítkovice. Here the vision of the client and the conceptual ambition of the architect has created a new world. A world in which the ruins of an industrial past fuse poetically with the interventions of a contemporary programme. The approach, which preserves in-tact the rusting network of the refinery, introduces a vast new public programme of theatres and event spaces. This is likely to become an important reference point for other Czech cities who are experiencing similar transitions.

5. Nový Dvůr Monastery; Toužim

The preservation, reuse and enhancement of redundant agricultural buildings which are reimaged as a monastery sets exemplar standards for this typology. Integrated within its historic landscape, the project fuses the vernacular and the contemporary into a formal composition of spiritual completeness and consistency. The spaces are elegant in form and detail, adopting a reductivist palette, where external form and internal sequence respond in equal measure to the poetic quality of the landscape setting and the quality of light; a tranquil and spiritual whole.

6. Three towers; Líbeznice

This project creates a new identity for the village of Líbeznice through a measured and surgical approach. A number of interventions have been carried out that are sensible, simple, and all within a limited budget. The jury considers that this project could in time represent a good example for many other Czech villages who have faltered through a rapid and uncontrolled period of urbanisation.

7. Reconstruction of the Tugendhat house, Brno

Villa Tugendhat is a magnificent example of recent modern architecture that through its careful restoration is now open to a wide audience now able to experience the extraordinary quality of Mies van Der Rohe's work; a work that demonstrates the unique and exquisite vision also found in projects such as the Barcelona Pavilion or Farnsworth House, but this time in a family house.

This renovation is a comprehensive and complete piece of work, both rigorous and attentive to every detail. In this way it does not shy away from the fundamental matter of this project in which knowledge, understanding and interpretation are as important as the original preserved fabric itself; a project therefore which is central to the discourse of authenticity. More importantly perhaps, the jury believes that the renovation of Villa Tugendhat should act as an exemplar approach to refurbishment and renovation essential for any architectural project.

Czech Architecture Awards 2016: Winner

8. Zen –houses, Studio and House; Liberec

This is a project which challenges the notions of the 'norm' and the 'expected' within a rural and regional context. Here, all typical assumptions about living and working are re-evaluated and brought together within the occupiers own personal preferences. Designed by, and for, an architect couple, the project is conceived as two simple cubic volumes, one for living and one for work, both rectilinear in plan and framing a substantial tree by the void between them with views to the south. In this way, the jury finds the basic conditions of life being addressed through experimentation and innovation, where the boundaries between public and private, living and working, are blurred.

The project takes industrial components and adopts a super efficient but 'joyful' attitude to their use and integration, often elevating them to the level of fetish. An agricultural cladding product of translucent acrylic panels is simply fixed to a softwood subframe made graphic through its visual detail. Flush bonded super sized windows enhance the delicate appearance whilst framing views in and out. Internally the buildings are finished with a reduced and basic palette of materials; particle board, timber joists, plywood, raw metal and rubber. Accordingly, this project demonstrates that the best buildings do not need to be the most expensive.

Whilst seemingly sophisticated in complexity through section and plan, this project could easily be considered a prototype of its kind, adaptable to programme, site or scale. A system therefore, which can be changed to suit the challenging needs of the individual,

CZECH

ARCHITECTURE

AWARD

2016

the family of the city. It also raises significant questions around notions of permanence, the temporary and of course matters of sustainability, adaptability and energy.

By awarding the inaugural Czech Architectural Award 2016 to the Zen-Houses, the jury believes this project represents a promising alternative strategy to the expected traditions of living; a reinterpretation of everything, which will encourage future architects to aspire to exemplar levels of creativity and execution regardless of scale or typology.