Marseille and Elche: Joint Winners of the European Prize for Urban Public Space 2014

The two winning projects of this year’s European Prize for Urban Public Space awarded by the Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCB) are the Re development of the Old Port in Marseille (France) and TheBradand Valley in Elche (Spain).

The Vieux Port of Marseille is the largest urban harbour in Europe. The foundational site of the capital of Provence, it was also the region’s economic centre until the mid-19th century, when the transport of goods and passengers was moved to the Great Port Maritime. The old harbour has a narrow entrance flanked by two old fortifications and it occupies a natural bay where the central districts of the city converge. However, despite its beauty and central location, the port had fallen into neglect and a state of disrepair by the end of the twentieth century. The prevalence of yachts, which deteriorated the port with architectural and visual barriers, blocked public access to 80 per cent of the docks area where, in addition, pedestrian use was discouraged due to the great amount of vehicular traffic.

In 2009, the City Council and the Marseille Provence Métropole (MPM) called for entries in a competition aimed at rectifying the situation. The first phase of the renovation has closed obstacles and vehicular transport from the port’s three wharves, which are now uniformly paved in pale granite, echoing the original limestone cobbles. The Quai des Belges, the central wharf, devotes 60 per cent of its surface to pedestrians and also protects them from the sun beneath the Grande Olympique, a rectangular canopy of 1,600 square metres, which can also be used for large crowd-pulling events. New floating docks have been installed to thus accommodate waterfront activities without interfering with the pedestrian flow or with traffic.

The entry’s position in the Old Port is a concept of highly reflective stainless steel. Its mirror surface reflects the surroundings and appears to be an entity, minimising its profile and reducing its structural visual impact.

The renovation of the Vieux-Port down the docks of visual and architectural barriers, thus making the presence of leisure boats compatible with visitors’ access and enjoyment for all citizens. Hence, while other urban ports combat economic decline by allowing prioritised uses that undermine their role as public space, the Vieux-Port has been renovated by improving its status as a shared place open to everyone.

The project was developed by MP3, a Community urbanisation Marseille Provence Métropole, Direction des Infrastructures with Michel Desvigne Parcs et Jardins. MDP, Foster + Partners, Transegri, Inergrep and ADEK. A Park in Spain near Elche, developed by Ayuntamiento de Elche with Francisco Leira Fuentes, Marta García Chón, Antonio Balle Jiménez and Próspero del Real Fabra, is the other winning project. The Vinuesa River is considerably reduced in size by the time it crosses the city of Elche. Irrigation upstream and very irregular rainfall means that water only flows in any abundance during the autumn, when sudden flooding can occur. This has cut out a riverbed that has steep sides, mainly as a result of landslides. In the 1970s, massive channelising work put an end to flooding but also eliminated the network of paths by which residents on the eight back slopes reached the adjoining Palmadal, a vast palm grove that is on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Reconnected to the condition of a marginal rubbish tip, the waterfront became a barrier that divided the city into two halves, both of which faced away from it.
In 2009, the City Council called for entries in a competition aimed at converting the riverbed into a three-kilometer-long linear park. The first phase of the work was completed on the upstream section, where the social deterioration of neighbourhoods and a scarcity of bridges made improvement most urgent. A temporary in situ office collected data on the areas of movement that were most requested by future users.
A network of paths was thus designed and built, which led to the name “The Braided Valley,” as the paths criss-cross on both sides of the river, which were also replanted with native species of vegetation. Before reaching the walls of the channel and joining to cross the riverbed, the paths rise up in a Y-shape, forming two footbridges that rest on clusters of metal pillars resembling tree trunks, giving a certain lightness to the structures.
Before completing the first phase of the project, however, the newly elected city council had inherited the project and did not embrace it as its own. “The Braided Valley” has not been officially opened yet, although local residents have spontaneously made it their own. With similar spontaneity, the riverside paths and bridges disregard the orthogonal nature of the urban layout and anticipate footpaths that a pedestrian’s common sense would trace on a badly situate parterre or on the ground of a snowbound city. It is to be hoped that common sense will prevail and that work on this park, which already stitches together the neighbourhoods through which it passes and connects them with natural spaces to the north of the city, will soon proceed anew.

In this year’s award, a total of 274 projects from 194 cities and 30 European countries were presented. The Prize is an honorary award to both authors and promoters of the works chosen. The prize-winning projects, the finalists and a selection made by the jury will be published in the European Archive of Urban Public Space, which has brought together and publicised the best projects awarded the Prize since it was first offered in 2000. The Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCB) organises this prize together with six European institutions: the Deutsche Architekturmuseum of Frankfurt (DAM); the Museum of Finnish Architecture of Helsinki (MFA); the Museum of Architecture and Design of Ljubljana (MAO); The Architecture Foundation of London (AP); La Cité de l’Architecture et du Patrimoine of Paris (Cité) and the Architekturzentrum Wien of Vienna (AzW), www.azw.org.

A network of intricate paths and footbridges has transformed the bed of the Nansha River in a linear park that stitches together the neighbourhoods through which it passes, connecting them with natural spaces to the north of the city.