

Swiss Pavilion

17th International Architecture Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia 2020
Two-stage competition in a selective procedure

Jury report

25 March 2019

For its second edition of being held as a public competition, the interest remained great among the architecture scene. Again, the adjudication of the competition in the form of an open call for entries for “the presentation of a national pavilion” is only partly comparable to the adjudication of a normal architectural competition, as the spectrum of the covered subjects, all very different in content, is broad, and a cross comparison between the projects was extremely challenging. The following quality criteria used in the discussion, as already mentioned in the call for entries, significantly contributed to the structuring of the evaluation process:

- - Clarity, contemporary relevance of the chosen theme.
- - Aesthetic and visual potential of the exhibition concept.
- - Curatorial and spatial potential of the proposed theme.
- - Capability of the team to reflect in a clear and innovative way a contemporary architectural theme.
- - Representative of the contemporary Swiss architectural scene.
- - Integration of the concept into the architecture of the Swiss Pavilion.
- - Communication, comprehensibility and ability to appeal to a large international public.
- - Adherence to the ceiling limit of expenditure of CHF 280,000, including fees, execution costs, visual and communicative support.

After the pre-selection phase, seven teams were invited by the jury to present their project.

Pre-selection

- **The seven rules**
studioSML, Sara Cavicchioli, Léo Collomb, Max Collomb, Lisa Collomb
- **Open Limit**
Agence LVPH, Pierre Geroudet
- **True Story**
Patrick Arnold, Benjamin Groothuijse
- **Walla**
Mikael Blomfelt, Roger Boltshauser, Andres Bosshard, Veronika Spierenburg, Sabine von Fischer
- **Les villes suisses se jettent à l'eau**
Valérie Hoffmeyer, Monique Keller, Sylvie Kleiber
- **VILLA SVIZZERA**
Josephine Eigner, Michelle Geilinger, Dennis Häusler, Jan Westerheide
- **Thicknesses of the Swiss border**
Mounir Ayoub, Vanessa Lacaille, Fabrice Aragno, Pierre Szczepski

Of these seven projects, the jury selected five of them for the second round. After a development phase, during which the content and form of the various projects were refined, a second presentation took place at the end of January 2019:

Shortlist:

- **The seven rules**
studioSML, Sara Cavicchioli, Léo Collomb, Max Collomb, Lisa Collomb
- **Walla**
Mikael Blomfelt, Roger Boltshauser, Andres Bosshard, Veronika Spierenburg, Sabine von Fischer
- **Les villes suisses se jettent à l'eau**
Valérie Hoffmeyer, Monique Keller, Sylvie Kleiber
- **VILLA SVIZZERA**
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- **Thicknesses of the Swiss border**
Mounir Ayoub, Vanessa Lacaille, Fabrice Aragno, Pierre Szczepski

Final adjudication

The jury voted unanimously for the project with the working title 'Thicknesses of the Swiss border' of Mounir Ayoub, Vanessa Lacaille, Fabrice Aragno and Pierre Szczepski. The jury was impressed by the accuracy and poesy of the theme underlying the proposal of this young winning team, and is convinced that the contribution to the presentation of the Swiss Pavilion at the 2020 Biennale will be well received.

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1. The seven rules

studioSML, Sara Cavicchioli, Léo Collomb, Max Collomb, Lisa Collomb

The title of the project "The 7 rules, architecture of common sense" refers to the legislative plan for Monte Carasso produced by Luigi Snozzi. What is most interesting in Snozzi's plan is the unwritten eighth rule, because it is oral and based on common sense: "Notwithstanding the established rules, a project can be approved if the Control Commission recognizes its correct reading of the site".

This is an interesting subject and central to the architectural debate: the restrictions imposed by the building regulations are often an obstacle that the architect must know how to interpret. They can prove to be a significant obstacle where architectural projects are concerned. For a Biennale devoted to architecture, the subject is acceptable, even though it has already been covered in different circumstances, debates, publications and public statements by architects and specialists.

The issue of building regulations is a topic affecting architects all over the world. The team in this case decided to tackle the issue starting with local authority building regulations, because they represent the very first element of governance that Swiss architects encounter along the way.

The visual impact of the project is impressive, as the countless pages of building regulations of 2,222 Swiss local authorities have been transformed into wallpaper covering the inner walls of the Swiss pavilion. The space within the pavilion is kept empty and the barely perceptible sound of the interviews could create a special atmosphere. The sound effects in fact consist of a series of interviews with Swiss architects, photographers, artists, choreographers and other professionals. Each "desire" is broadcast by loudspeakers along the walls. The sound is audible if you stand near the walls, while in the middle of the room it comes over as gentle whispers. The interviewees respond to a series of questions concerning their aspirations for the future, knowing that we navigate in such a jungle of regulations.

In the courtyard of the pavilion, four models in cast brass represent architecture that has reacted against municipal regulations. Each linguistic area of Switzerland is represented by a built project. The aim of their proposal is to bring architects back into the public and political sphere, and to redefine their role. This is done with a degree of humour. This reflection is the result of lived experience.

We wonder whether the issue of the excess of building regulations they are drawing attention to can be easily understood by a large mixed audience. We also think that the four models representing architecture that has reacted against municipal regulations need to be explained in more detail to make them comprehensible to visitors.

In addition, the interviews with architects, photographers, artists, choreographers and other professionals, and the questions being asked, are maybe too general.

Assessment criteria of the jury

Topic relevance

Interesting and central to the architectural debate.

Conceptual clarity

The wallpaper has great clarity in its message while the architecture of common sense is missing clarity. La comprensione nella forma proposta potrebbe non essere immediata.

Performative potential

The concept idea was very promising, as well as the centerpiece of the composition with the wallpaper. The final form of the project does not convince in its performative potential.

Feasibility

High- the project is certainly workable, and can be implemented without any problem.

Budget

Good, the project entails hardly any financial risks.

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2. Walla

Mikael Blomfelt, Roger Boltshauser, Andres Bosshard, Veronika Spierenburg, Sabine von Fischer

The Walla concept was an acoustic exploration of architecture, of our perception of space through our sense of hearing. It looked to sensitize and make the audience aware of this key sense both in internal architectural space but also civic, urban space: using the differing conditions of the spaces of the pavilion, including its external courtyard. The topic highlighted the importance of sound in architecture given the increase in density of Swiss and other cities, with growing populations leading to the need to live closer and more intensely together.

The installation developed a series of different 'sound instruments' in each space of the pavilion – one resonating sound; one muffling it; one intensifying it and one in the courtyard which poked out above the wall of the courtyard, acting as a listening tube to capture the 'murmur' of the city beyond.

The jury found the topic of sound to be a really interesting and relevant one to be addressed. The team of Mikael Blomfelt, Roger Boltshauser, Andres Bosshard, Veronika Spierenburg, Sabine von Fischer, composed of architects, an artist and a sound artist, was a very impressive one. They presented in a full and professional manner – while also maintaining a nice playful aspect to their presentation.

Other senses such as smell were also brought into play in the installation, although the jury wondered if there could have been a visual/lighting concept too to support the main acoustic one. In the second presentation, the lack of acoustic examples of soundscapes to illustrate the concept appeared to be a missed opportunity.

The theme and idea of the exhibition, especially that of the 'murmur' of the city, had rich poetic potential and was interestingly combined with the technical in the proposal. However the jury had doubts that the form of the exhibition as developed had retained the poetics of the original. Elements like the listening 'ears' were a nice idea, but it was felt that the materialization of the large sound instruments was in danger of making the whole installation a technorama, a fairground of attractions. It promised a nice experience, but it was not clear what the audience was meant to take away from the experience exactly.

The original clarity and simplicity of the idea of the 'murmur' and of using the pavilion itself as an instrument seemed to have been lost in final form as developed, which was very formal, obscuring rather than working with the architecture of the pavilion.

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Assessment criteria of the jury

Topic relevance

Very interesting and relevant.

Conceptual clarity

The potential of the original idea appeared to be lost in the installation as proposed – particularly the direct use of the building as an instrument.

Performative potential

The concept idea was very promising but the final proposal was composed too much of individual attractions with the overall sense of the idea lost.

Feasibility

Feasible but very complex install – which would be costly (see budget below) – needing to be fabricated in Switzerland, transported and tested extensively.

Budget

Very high budget required. The sponsorship lined up appeared unlikely to be sufficient and more would need to be secured. Individual honorariums for team members set rather high.

3. «Les villes suisses se jettent à l'eau»

Valérie Hoffmeyer, Monique Keller, Sylvie Kleiber

The strength of this project lies in the way it links several different interventions with the relationship between Swiss people/towns and water. Starting with the popular Swiss practice of wild swimming, the female team of Valérie Hoffmeyer (architect and landscape designer), Sylvie Kleiber (stage designer) and Monique Keller (architect, journalist and exhibition organizer) tackle a number of key questions, at a time when water management is undoubtedly set to play a central role in urban development.

In "Swiss towns head for the water", the aim is to document this "return to the water" in three stages. Firstly, from the perspective of the swimmer, in a long film sequence showing the diversity of urban and semi-urban shorelines, amounting to a survey of Swiss towns seen from the rivers on which they stand. Secondly, by illustrating several current projects to restore or manage Swiss river banks, and, finally, by using the paintings room to project a film by the artist Rudy Decelière, who has navigated the Rhone at the speed of the current, shooting from just above water level. The visitor can move freely between the different areas and, throughout the Biennale, will find the pavilion patio being used to stage events such as round tables, concerts and meetings devoted to water-related topics.

The jury appreciated the multidisciplinary approach to the subject of water and welcomed the injection of social activity and a fun element into what is a very serious issue. They were, however, doubtful about the extreme diversity and large number of the aspects tackled.

The historical and societal framework of the subject is very well presented, as are the issues to which it now gives rise. However, where the actual treatment of the subject is concerned, the diversity of approaches is extremely broad: very didactic on the one hand (exhibiting of projects), purely artistic on the other (an artist's work). As the jury see it, there is a danger that this eagerness to please could weaken the impact of the project. Moreover, the meaning and content of the material screened at the entrance to the pavilion is not very clear.

Rudy Decelière's video fleuve has great potential, but the framing of this installation and its location raises questions. Is it wise to completely black out the paintings room? In addition, the presentation of the exhibition of riverbank management projects at this stage is not very convincing: how are the projects chosen, and presented? The jury fears this will amount to no more than a juxtaposition of architectural display panels. Finally, the series of events to be staged on the patio is not clearly defined and could deteriorate into activity for activity's sake.

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Assessment criteria of the jury

Topic relevance

Relevant, contemporary, subtle and important.

Conceptual clarity

A solid, promising foundation, but the quality and types of approaches adopted needs further definition and refinement. The artistic aspect is dominant, crowding out the subject matter.

Performative potential

Good but, where the visitor is concerned, raises questions as to the attractiveness of the form adopted. The idea of a pontoon is brilliant, but the format is rather didactic.

Feasibility

The way in which the floor/riverbank is presented needs to be reconsidered (Is it a projection from the wall or a real "pontoon"? What effect will it really have on the visitor?), but the jury had no doubts as to the overall feasibility of the project.

Budget

The budget appears to be correct and trustworthy.

4. VILLA SVIZZERA

Josephine Eigner, Michelle Geilinger, Dennis Häusler, Jan Westerheide

The VILLA SVIZZERA project by Josephine Eigner, Michelle Geilinger, Dennis Häusler and Jan Westerheide addresses the subject of the privatization of public space, or the absorption of space within (capital-)controlled processes. One interesting aspect is the interlinking of social criticism with architecture and space, or the reading of space as a consequence of social developments.

The privatization of public space is a politically controversial and highly topical subject. It fits well into the context of the architecture biennale, and it is especially relevant to Switzerland.

In the course of the project the Villa, a synonym for privacy and affluence, logically became a members-only club. This strong image has the potential to polarize, and to convey a trenchant statement – several varieties of which are expressed in the project by means of access rules, of participation in a sense of belonging in the form of a shop, of application-related activities.

The strength of the project lies in its staging possibilities and the emotional impact of acceptance or rejection – but these are also its weaknesses. Nor is it yet sufficiently clear what visitors could really experience when “visiting” the club, or what strategies are pursued in the event that access is refused.

In the project team’s proposal the pavilion is given an “outer skin”, and thus a new face. The jury does not think this would be necessary for the delivery of the statement: it makes the pavilion itself disappear without adding any extra benefit.

The idea of the shop is intellectually intriguing, but in terms of its design, execution (selling is bureaucracy-heavy) and cost it is disproportionate to the design of the club.

A direct transfer of the concept to the real world is possible only in extremely general terms. Unfortunately this means that the statement also remains somewhat vague.

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Assessment criteria of the jury

Relevance of the subject

Relevant, controversial, especially topical for Switzerland.

Conceptual clarity

The concept is clear and concise, but this also gives it a certain facile quality. It combines critical reflection with humorous staging.

Performative potential

Implementation in this form is possible, but a few questions remain open – for example with regard to dealing with the consequences of rejection.

Feasibility

Feasible, but still vague in terms of intention.

Budget

The jury believes the proposed budget would be adequate for the project's implementation.

5. Thicknesses of the Swiss border

Mounir Ayoub, Vanessa Lacaille, Fabrice Aragno, Pierre Szczepski

The “Thicknesses of the Swiss Border” project tackles the subject of how a frontier is perceived spatially. It subtly questions its true form and dimensions. The aim of the project is to reconstruct a spatial “interpretation” of the Swiss frontier as perceived by local inhabitants. The idea is that the team will go out to meet the local community and, in discussion, the locals will together construct the representative imprint of their border area.

The politically very topical subject of frontiers is approached from a poetic perspective. What is the physical and spatial dimension of a frontier? How do we perceive it? What is our relationship with it?

The participatory nature of the project makes it possible, on the one hand, to give a voice to the local population and, on the other, to open up a discussion of the thicknesses and true forms of legally defined lines. In advance of the Biennale, a truck equipped with a modelling workshop will travel along the Swiss border meeting the local inhabitants. A sample of around 20 emblematic border locations will be chosen to represent its diversity. The methodology for selecting the locations, the persons involved and the working processes has yet to be defined in detail.

The main working tool is a model to be shaped with the participation of the local people and a video capturing the stories and projected ideas associated with these areas. The dimension of doing things together, and doing them on the spot, is one of the project’s strengths. The making of the models and the participatory process and craftsmanship involved is central to the installation in Venice. The twenty models of the twenty emblematic locations selected, together with the associated stories, is the principal aspect of the installation. The form of the installation has yet to be defined in detail, the question being how to best bring out the poetry and strength of the subject. The sense of roaming from place to place will be made clear so as to anchor the project.

The question of the spatial perception of a place by its inhabitants is one of the strengths of the project. Indeed, having a place “translated” by its own community provides an interpretation of the zeitgeist. On the one hand, it opens up a national discussion of the central issue of perception in the broadest sense, while drawing a physical and emotional portrait of a frontier and a cultural identity. The project process is an integral part of the final product. The artisanal aspect of the final installation has yet to be defined in detail.

The poetic potential of a very contemporary topic is convincing. The subtle and poetic approach to the thickness of a frontier is promising. Perception is the key element in the interpretation of this project, presented in the form of a large installation, a model, the imprint of a collective story. The adventure of travelling from place to place and meeting the locals leads to discussion with non-professionals. “Thicknesses of the Swiss boarder” has the potential for exceptional spatial and architectural mediation.

The jury is unanimous in recommending “Thicknesses of the Swiss border”.

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Assessment criteria of the jury

Topic relevance

Relevant, poetic, subtle and intelligent.

Conceptual clarity

Solid and promising foundation, requiring further definition and refinement. Need to define the framework for selecting the places and people involved. Need to define the "creative activity" and the way it is staged.

Performative potential

Good to excellent, depending on the finalization and precision of the concept and the related process. It is imperative that the process be clearly identifiable, to highlight the subtlety and poetry of the project.

Feasibility

Realistic, the process is central to the project. Reflect on and develop the constructive quality and materiality of the "model".

Budget

To be defined in detail.