

Renovation of the Palazzo Rosso, Textile Museum St. Gallen

St. Gallen, April 2021

The Palazzo Rosso is not only to be subjected to a complete renovation but also updated so that it shines in new splendour. An anonymous project competition taking place in two phases was carried out in recent months. The winning project by the name of “Das Schwere ist des Leichten Wurzelgrund” (The Heavy Is the Root of the Light) by Christian Kerez from Zurich demonstrates a great opportunity for raising the profile of the Palazzo Rosso. At the same time, it presents a new dimension for the future Textile Museum. This project is now undergoing further development by order of the Foundation, during which financing questions and feasibility are to be clarified. In autumn, each of the top-ranked projects from the competition are to be exhibited in the Textile Museum.

The Textile Museum serves as a crucial linchpin for the identity of Eastern Switzerland. Both the building and the collections of the museum bear witness to and demonstrate how the road was paved for the international success of the Swiss textile industry. The various exhibitions on display there, such as the current exhibition “Robes politiques – Frauen Macht Mode” (Robes politiques – Women Power Fashion) attract visitors to the museum.

Visionary ideas for the future

After 140 years, the premises no longer meet today’s standards when it comes to visitor-friendliness and safety. The building is to be completely renovated from the ground up so that in future it can present itself more openly and impressively with a complementary redesign. As the owner of the Palazzo Rosso, the Textile Museum Foundation is looking to make the house attractive to visitors from both near and far. The ultimate goal is a building capable of transforming itself so that it can evolve with the spirit of the times for many years to come. The Foundation has made the decision to approach the challenge of making this vision for the building a reality by holding an architectural competition.

Appreciating its existing features while daring to create new ones

According to the competition tender, the Foundation is looking for a project that is persuasive in regard to architecture and urban development, that respects the qualities of the existing building in terms of architectonic characteristics and that complements them in a meaningful way. It should also ensure that the building can be operated in an optimal manner over the long term and continue to inspire museum visitors. The three primary tasks of the architectural competition consisted of an additional large exhibition space that meets state-of-the-art technical requirements, the creation of

new archive space for professional storage of art objects, and the opening up of the building on the lowest floor as well as the addition of a catering area.

2020 ideas competition

In order to obtain a variety of ideas for this extraordinary architectural task that would be as diverse as possible, the Foundation extended an invitation to those who would wish to participate in an anonymous project competition taking place in two phases in spring 2020. In the first phase, the ideas competition, a total of 181 teams provided submissions. After that, 15 teams were invited to participate in the anonymous project competition. Judging of the competition experienced delays due to the pandemic and was not completed until mid-March 2021.

Several ideas were persuasive

The jury considered the wide range of project proposals and enjoyed viewing the various approaches to the design challenge. With the ideas and projects they submitted, all the participants made a significant contribution to finding a solution. “We as the jury are delighted with the wide range of entries and are well aware of the great work done by the teams. We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone for their dedication and commitment to the Textile Museum and the city of St. Gallen,” said Werner Binotto, who served as chairman of the jury of experts. He went on to explain how the great variety of projects made it a challenge to create a shortlist.

After intensively considering the merits of the five remaining projects, the jury made the decision to rank the following five submissions and recognise each of them with a prize:

1. “Das Schwere ist des Leichten Wurzelgrund”, Christian Kerez, architect, Zurich
2. “balance”, jessenvollenweider architektur, Basel
3. “STELLE”, BBK Architekten, Balzers/Azmoos
4. “A NEW WHITE VEIL”, Sou Fujimoto Architects, Tokyo/Paris
5. “BLUE VELVET OAK”, Jonas Wirth, Architect, Basel

Winning project stimulates discussion

A majority of the jury chose “Das Schwere ist des Leichten Wurzelgrund” as the winning project. The project arrives at a surprising result, sparking debate and discussion like no other design. It also demonstrated that a tailored competition can elicit solutions that may not be obvious at first glance.

Courageously one step ahead

With his design, Kerez made maximum use of the latitude provided in the task description. He thus demonstrates an enormous opportunity to enhance the allure, usability and dimensions of the future Textile Museum. Kerez's project makes the Textile Museum and its extension look bigger and bolder than the other submissions.

A floating space

The design is distinguished by the architect's audacious approach, looking beyond the obvious in regard to what could be accomplished. The crowning achievement of the design can be found in and below the building's foundation, where a completely new space over which the old building will hover is to be excavated. The sheer size of this space is astonishing and opens up entirely new possibilities for special exhibitions, which could then be equipped and furnished as desired.

Public exhibition in autumn

In a next step, the Textile Museum Foundation is commissioning work to be done on exploring the winning project in greater depth and developing it further. The aspects of technical and structural feasibility as well as financial viability are to be illuminated, with completion of this task planned for autumn 2021. After that, a public exhibition of the ranked projects in the Textile Museum is scheduled, along with dissemination of information on the results of the feasibility study and the further plans.