

Designing Our Own Identity ...

With this year's Architectural Academic Award set to be presented at Real Vienna May 27-29, *Poland Monthly* catches up with last year's winner, Aleksandra Doniec and Guy Perry of award organisers Investment Visions + Environments (INVI), to talk about the impact of the award on young architects and sustainable development in the region.

This year INVI focuses on the theme Authenticity of the Central European City and is open to students from countries throughout Central and Eastern Europe. There are several objectives. "Obviously to assist students at a very critical time in their careers and to allow some of them to get a bit of a boost, whether they use that boost for personal use or to buy equipment," says Guy Perry. The second objective is to raise awareness amongst both students and professionals. "I think that it is a moment of cross-fertilisation, where young people get to know about the professional world and the professionals gain a better sense of what academia and a younger generation consider to be the main issues relevant to their cities," Perry explains.

"Another aspect that's always tied in to the award every year is that Central and Eastern Europe has to begin to define on its own terms what is good design, what is good urbanism, it is no longer something that they should inherit from the West or from Dubai for example. They have to establish their own criteria which is not just about the usual issues of environmental sustainability but it's also about cultural sustainability, about how these cultures continue to sustain themselves and have their own identity, if you will," says Perry. "The world is a small place now and each of these countries and universities has to endorse a local perspective. Of course we look for originality in these projects, but originality that is appropriate to the context."

One criticism frequently made about awards such as this is that after the awards ceremony is over, nothing really happens. But Doniec would not sub-

scribe to such a point of view, explaining what kind of an impact winning the award last year had on her professional and personal life. "Above all it gave me more self-confidence, which is really important in my line of work—both in terms of making decisions and working with investors," she says.

This confidence is a valuable asset as she continues her career in her native Wrocław. "I run my own small firm and also co-operate with larger companies at the same time. One of them is Major Architekci, with whom we are working on a sport and recreation centre in Wrocław at the moment," she explains.

However, Doniec's winning design has not reached development stage, a fact which is understood to her. "Unfortunately, as far as I know, the project hasn't been implemented, which comes as no surprise," Doniec says. "Right now, there are other needs and problems in our society that have to be dealt with. Of course I think that sustainable design has so many benefits, that it's worth considering even if it is more expensive, but so far it's only private investors who can afford to think like that".

In terms of the profile of sustainability in Poland, Perry sees some encouraging signs, citing the experience of transition from a Soviet-dominated society to the Poland we see today as a key source of inspiration for young professionals. "We find that many of the most original projects in Europe at the moment are in these countries that have made a transition," says Perry. "Arguably the most progressive shopping mall in Europe is Złote Tarasy, and these things should be hap-

pening more and more, we should be leaders."

Doniec is also upbeat, considering the battle for awareness and commitment amongst architects to have already been won. "Nowadays it's second nature for architects to think about sustainable design, it has become an integral part of our work," she says. "The problem comes when you are trying to convince investors of the importance of this way of thinking."

On winning the award last year, Doniec stressed that there was insufficient recognition of sustainable development by local authorities in Poland. But she sees positive changes coming our way. "Of course the situation has changed, but not exactly in the way I would like it to have," she says. "Investors and developers only think about how much profit they can make, how much money per square metre they will be able to earn. Sustainable development is only a factor in new housing investments designed to appeal to the rich, but hopefully that will change and it will have a wider impact".

Perry is more positive, highlighting Wrocław as the city in Poland that is leading the way in terms of encouraging sustainable living. "I can't say that I'm familiar enough with each city to fully comment, but I'm very impressed by the seriousness of Wrocław's undertaking to upgrade public infrastructure and public spaces. They've taken the lead on taking this seriously. Wrocław is so far the only city in Poland that I have seen do this wholeheartedly".

But while for some those changes are coming quickly enough, for others Poland is in danger of lagging behind her neighbours in the region. Says Perry: "Poland is a larger country and countries like the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary are all so much further ahead in terms of infrastructure that you can't compare. I would have to say though that the rate of progress here has not been as rapid as in other parts of central Europe."

In terms of the future, Perry highlights the Euro 2012 football championship as a major opportunity for Poland to speed up this rate of change and improvement. "Euro 2012 is a once in a generation chance," Perry says. "Unfortunately things should really be further underway than they are now. I don't see that there's enough progress being made, you have to want this. I was in Barcelona in the 1980s

when they were preparing for the Olympics and the determination, the passion of the Catalan people, the government, the professionals etc, to make sure that this was a successful event is something I'll never forget. I don't see that passion here. Let's hope that it still happens. There is so much that is positive about the potential of Polish cities, it would be a missed opportunity. If we

could just make leaders realise that this is the time to make cities here attractive, not just for visitors, but for Polish people as well, to give young professionals who can go anywhere a reason to stay. You have to compete to keep these people and that's not going to get any easier."

So, with Poland's progress at times frustratingly slow, and more and more young professionals looking beyond

Poland, is Doniec tempted to move abroad? "No!," is her answer. "Of course I've thought about it, but on the other hand the rate of construction in Poland at the moment is great. There is so much work to do, that in my opinion this is the right place for a young architect to develop, as well as work on creating a more environmentally-conscious atmosphere."

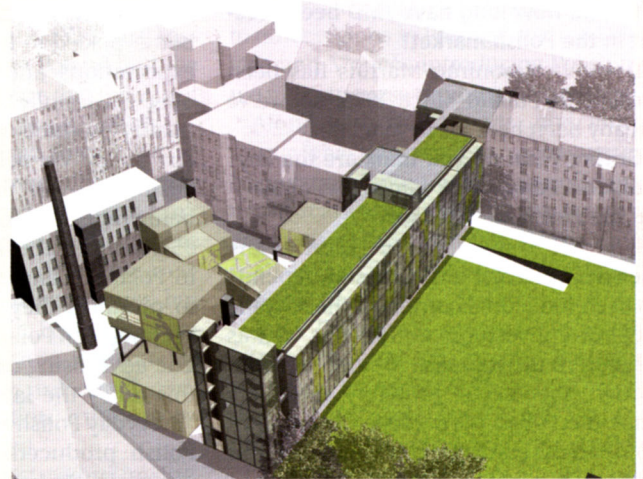
■ Rosemary Griffin



HOUSING AND SERVICE COMPLEX FOR WROCŁAW

Wrocław is currently one of the fastest developing cities in Poland. Somehow this process shows a general tendency in Central and Eastern Europe. Societies, lifestyle and therefore places are being changed. But there are still districts, where nothing has happened for many years. It is quite common, that where the surroundings stay in a bad condition, it has an equally bad or even devastating influence on the local society.

The site, which was chosen for this project is exactly such a place. It is located in Wrocław's downtown district, a part of the city, which is visibly neglected. Buildings date mainly from the 19th century show the influence of time. It is an area of high unemployment. Unfortunately this situation has an influence on young people. The aim was to find an answer by attempting to change the mentality of such communities. The idea of this project is to combine simple sports pavilions with residential buildings. To show, how it works, an evaluation of one quarter in city center of Wrocław was chosen. The main part of the project consists of housing and



service building in the centre of the plot. It divides the quarter into two zones; recreational for all inhabitants and a small public sports and cultural centre. Alongside the building runs a public passage which is where independent sports pavilions are to be placed. The existing old industrial building should be converted into a cultural centre.

The suggested system consists of blending light structures into the existing urban situation, so that people have the opportunity of observing different arts of activities during their everyday life. We can put those boxes in a really dense structure or on different heights. They are cheap and planned for a dozen or so years. The art of placing a sports pavilion in a certain place depends on the local community's needs. Those people are to take care of pavilions and can choose from: boxing, table tennis, trampoline/squash, body-building gym, fitness, martial arts. The aim is to prove that you do not need much money, time or strength to go in for sports. ■

by Aleksandra Doniec from University of Technology, Wrocław