Schindler Award for Architecture 2004
〈Access for All〉
A milestone on a long journey

“A good solution for people with disabilities is always also the best solution for people without,” quoted jury member Luc Bonnard, Vice President of the Board of Directors of Schindler Holding Ltd, from the booklet “European Concept for Accessibility” (ECA 2003). For Luc Bonnard, this was the central principle of the “Access for all” Schindler Award. But although there are European guidelines to ensure that this principle is respected, its implementation needs time and commitment. The European Committee designated 2003 as the European Year of People with Disabilities in order to draw attention to the problems relating to accessibility and the need for really accessible buildings. As a partner of the European Year of People with Disabilities, Schindler took this opportunity of launching a competition for students of architecture in the academic year 2003/2004.

Students in the final two years were eligible for the competition. They had the option of registering as a class or as a single candidate, and the support of a professor was required in either case. The echo was impressive: 497 students, supported by 110 professors of 78 schools applied, roughly 280 of them completed their designs as single persons or groups. Finally, projects of 192 students fulfilled the conditions and were admitted for adjudication in Brussels. The jury of ten under the chairmanship of Prof. Thomas Sieverts selected ten designs from these projects. These were divided up into prizes 1 to 3 and seven honorable mentions.

The spectrum of the designs reflects the different cultures of Europe, from Georgia to Sweden, Poland to France. The awareness of the special – although basically self-evident – requirement of people with disabilities is not equally pronounced everywhere. The competition has also shown that too little attention is paid to this aspect by the school of architecture. Often, ramps and lifts are only added to a design at a later stage, and the result is a solution that is neither functionally nor architecturally satisfying. Good solutions for people with and without disabilities, solutions that are also satisfactory to architects, can only ensue when the aspect of accessibility is integrated in the project from the very beginning. The projects submitted for the Schindler Award also included designs that paid too little attention to the aspect of accessibility. This may be partly due to the difficulty inherent in the task, but this cannot be the only reason, for the best of the ten selected designs clearly show that it was thoroughly possible to ensure accessibility for everyone within the framework of the competition project.

There is still a long way to go before the requirement of accessibility becomes firmly established in the minds of architects and their clients. The Schindler Award is an important milestone because it tackles the problem at the point where it is most effective: in Europe’s schools of architecture where future architects are trained.

Werner Huber
The buildings on both sides of the Parvis de Saint-Gilles make a unified, homogeneous impression.

Rue de Moscou connects Rue de l’Hôtel des Monnaies with the Parvis.

Rue de l’Hôtel des Monnaies marks the southern boundary of the competition area.

Saint-Gilles is one of the 19 autonomous communes that constitute the Belgian capital of Brussels. Unlike the other districts of Brussels, Saint-Gilles’s center has hitherto been spared any large-scale interventions. The competition for the Schindler Award shows how the commune could enhance the status of its center under the aspect of “Access for all.”
Brussels, the capital of Belgium and the capital of Europe, is made up of 19 independent communes. The city of Brussels consists solely of the center within the former ring of fortifications and two suburbs towards the north and east. The metropolis, as the bilingual city of Brussels is usually called, is officially known as “Région de Bruxelles-Capitale” in French, and “Brusselse Hoofdstedelijk Gewest” in Flemish. The political fragmentation of this densely interwoven city is one of the reasons for the often disorderly urban development of the city during the course of the 20th century. Experts speak of the “Bruxellisation” that has figured the town beyond recognition in several places.

Parvis and Carré, the heart of Saint-Gilles
Saint-Gilles is located to the west of the “Pentagon,” as the Brussels city center is known owing to its characteristic shape. The origins of Saint-Gilles date back to the hamlet of Obbrussel (Haut-Bruxelles), which in 1216 acquired its own church, dedicated to Saint Gilles, which finally gave the commune its name in 1800. Up to the mid-19th century, Saint-Gilles remained a suburb along the road to Alsemberg, but the complex of boulevards that replaced the second fortifications ring, the newly built church and the construction of a community house in 1860 marked the beginning of a turbulent development for the community. The area was overlaid by a grid of roads, and in the course of the decades was densely built on until it formed a part of the Belgian capital.

The Quartier du Centre, where Saint-Gilles originated, has remained the center of the commune up till today. The Parvis de Saint-Gilles, a funnel-shaped, slightly crooked square where the market is held in the mornings, is situated in front of the church. An important role in the square was played by the “Aegidium,” a complex constructed as a “diamond palace” in 1905 with various halls accessed only by a narrow passage from the Parvis. However, the building has been more or less deserted since the 1970s when the fire authorities virtually forbade its use. At the end of the Parvis de Saint-Gilles, the crooked urban area joins rue Jourdan, a long, straight road leading to the avenue Louise which accommodates the luxury shops. A rhomboid piece of ground at the end of the Parvis was once the location of the Hôtel des Monnaies, Belgium’s mint. After its demolition in 1979, the resulting free area was turned into a car park, a park and a market place. In the mornings, the Carré was the scene of lively activity, but when the fire authorities virtually forbade its use. At the end of the Parvis de Saint-Gilles, the crooked urban area joins rue Jourdan, a long, straight road leading to the avenue Louise which accommodates the luxury shops. A rhomboid piece of ground at the end of the Parvis was once the location of the Hôtel des Monnaies, Belgium’s mint. After its demolition in 1979, the resulting free area was turned into a car park, a park and a market place. In the mornings, the Carré was the scene of lively activity, but for the rest time it eked out a shadowy existence, and it never developed into a center of the commune.

Using the potential
Unlike some of Brussels’ other communes in which the demolition hammer had done a thorough job, the developments carried out in Saint-Gilles during the turn of the 19th to the 20th century have remained largely untouched. Many of the properties are, however, in bad condition, and the rents are correspondingly low. The people who live here are not EU diplomats but mostly immigrants from the south of Europe and north Africa. They make the street bright and colorful, particularly the market on the Parvis de Saint-Gilles. With the competition for the Schindler Award, the authorities of Saint-Gilles hope to acquire ideas and suggestions for enhancing the status of their center. The competition area comprises the Parvis de Saint-Gilles and the Carré de l’ancien Hôtel des Monnaies. The central functions of Saint-Gilles are to be supported, and the Carré that has hitherto eked out such a shadowy existence is to be integrated in the urban life, thereby reinforcing the importance of the area as a nerve center between the old Porte de Hall city gate, the business center along the avenue Louise, and the Hôtel de Ville location 500 meters to the south. The competition program stipulated the construction of a covered market place, the revival of the urban area of the Carré, housing for 150 persons and a culture center. The competitors were asked to work on the whole area and select one part of it for profounder analysis – cultural and social facilities, housing, shops and a market.

“Access for all”
The most important aspect of the competition is “Access for all.” But although this will include accesses via ramps and elevators, this in itself is not enough. “People with disabilities may no longer be regarded as ‘special cases.’ They must neither be forced to use special routes in order to reach their destination, nor must they have to rely on special premises and installations,” wrote Miguel A. Rodriguez, President of Schindler Europe, in his preamble to the competition. And something that must not be forgotten is that unrestricted accessibility must not be limited to persons in wheelchairs – which is often what one thinks of first – but be equally available for the partially sighted, the partially hearing and the mentally handicapped.

As the results of the competition have shown, these stipulations are not always taken seriously enough. Certainly, there are cultural differences in dealing with disabilities; some countries are way ahead on the path towards the equal integration of all members of society, whereas in others exclusion is still rife. Only a few of the submitted works succeeded in providing convincing solutions to the requirement of “Access for all.”

St-Gilles must take the bull by the horns
With this competition, Saint-Gilles received ten proposals for ways for the community to up-value its center. The fact that among them were some fantastic, unrealizable designs is typical of student competitions, and some of the designs make it clear that their authors did not have the opportunity to view the site and had to make do with the plans, texts and photographs that were put at their disposal. Sometimes, however, it is precisely the unprejudiced view from outside that reveals unexpected perspectives. However, some of the contributions show that Saint-Gilles can enhance its center without having to resort to exaggeration. Up till now, the center of Saint-Gilles has been spared “Bruxellisation.” This means that careful procedure is indicated, for the magnificent urban qualities – in particular the interesting crooked shape of the Parvis de Saint-Gilles – must on no account be destroyed, but reinforced. With its participation in this competition, the commune has virtually committed itself to this aim under the aspect of “Access for all.”

A public park as a new heart

In this project, a many-terraced public garden forms the heart of Saint-Gilles. A multipurpose building and a row of residential buildings frame the park on two sides, and ramps and elevators connect the different levels. An elegant, beautifully designed project by Cécil Tirard from Paris.

Numerous strong points

The jury liked a number of aspects of the project: the elegant association between the old and the new market, the public garden with access for everyone, and the apartments with the qualities of single-family houses. The apartments have private gardens and entrance areas that facilitate contact with visitors and other residents. The elevators open on two sides – a considerable advantage for wheelchair users. The extended market provides a series of rest rooms and vantage platforms. Different surfaces, colors, materials and textures help handicapped persons to find their way around independently in spite of the numerous ramps and platforms. The jury was unanimously agreed that this is an elegant project, easily comprehensible and beautifully presented.

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School: Ecole d’Architecture de Paris-Belleville (Architectural School of Paris-Belleville, France)

Professor: Bernard Leroy

Student: Cécil Tirard
1 A public patchwork park, flanked by buildings on two sides, forms the new heart of Saint-Gilles.

2 The market is extended beyond the Parvis into rue Jourdan.

3 The connecting grid gives the Saint-Gilles center the appearance of unity.

4 Openings at the entrance to the apartments in rue de l’Hôtel des Monnaies create connections between the storeys.

5 Lightweight roofs span the market on the Parvis de Saint-Gilles.

6 The park with its different areas constitutes a calm oasis in the hectic bustle of the city.
"Out of sight, out of mind" – this proverb is the starting point of the project by Bartłomiej Homiński and Michał Jezierski, two students from the Cracow Polytechnic. This is based on the fact that even the buildings that are easily accessible to everyone often appear inaccessible because they are hidden behind thick walls. The neighboring hall of the Aegidium is the best example of this: seen from the road, it is impossible to guess what is inside it. By way of contrast, the two students from Poland create urban spaces that, although they are clearly defined, have boundaries that are transparent and perforated.

In their design, rue Jourdan, which once used to be defined by the Hôtel des Monnaies, is now spatially determined by a building with an assembly hall, shops and a social center. It is a transparent two-storey building, and the façade of the hall on the street side can even be moved to one side for specific events. A cafeteria and snack bar glazed on three sides on the corner between rue Jourdan and rue de Moscou is a place to see and be seen in. It is located on the visual axis of the Parvis, whose role of market place will be given a new status. The architects also propose a steel roof construction spanned with canvas that extends into the rue Jourdan.

The architects use the terrain ascending from rue Jourdan to rue de l’Hôtel des Monnaies to conceal the multipurpose hall under a sloping roof designed as a park. Interlocking, sloping green areas form a public park rising to rue Jourdan in the interior of the Carré de l’ancien Hôtel des Monnaies. The assembly hall cannot be seen from here, and only the social center is visible as a single-storey pavilion on the edge of rue Jourdan.

The residential buildings frame the park on the opposite side like a brace. The access is in each case inserted as a transparent volume between two buildings. The attractive thing about the apartments is their exterior space, which protrudes like a pier far out into the treetops. Thus persons who are virtually, or completely, unable to leave their apartment find themselves in the middle of the park and able to participate in what is going on round them – a welcome change from the conventional retracted loggias.

Professional presentation

In this project, accessibility has been interpreted not only as a physical phenomenon, for the apartments are also mentally accessible, providing views from the inside to the outside and from the outside to the inside, thereby overcoming the radical separation of solid walls. The residents are actors in a public spectacle. But the completely glazed assembly hall in the rue Jourdan also invites people to come in and take part in the social life of the neighborhood. The jury liked this principle of accessibility; in particular, they appreciated the innovative contributions to the apartments and the fine details such as the balconies in the trees: “It must be a real pleasure for elderly people to sit in the trees over the public park and chat with their neighbors,” said the jury, and added “The project is rich in content, consistent and well carried through.”

--- School: Politechnika Krakowska, Wydział Architektury, [Cracow Polytechnic, department of architecture, Cracow, Poland]
--- Professor: Andrzej Wyżykowski
--- Students: Bartłomiej Homiński, Michał Jezierski

The design blurs the dividing line between inside and outside in the interests of communication between the residents. In the case of the residential building, they introduce an architectural innovation: balconies in the trees. A rich and varied project, professionally presented.
1. The building with a hall, shops and social center is located in rue Jourdan. The terraced park lies behind it.

2. The residential buildings frame the park like a brace. Long balconies extend into the trees and form a pleasant exterior area to the apartments.

3. A construction spanned with canvas protects the market from sun and rain.

4-5. A hall and shops are placed on the level of rue Jourdan, with a covered garage inserted into the slope. The social center and the apartments are one storey higher up, on the level of the park.

6-8. The apartments are all differently designed. Balconies encourage communication.
Eight steps to urban well-being

The group of students from Lund in Sweden decided against large-scale changes to the center of Saint-Gilles in favor of step-by-step alterations. Eight short anecdotes introduce the eight steps of the project. The jury were equally impressed by the procedure and the result.

Successful implementation

The authors lead the viewer through the project with the help of eight short anecdotes based on the principle of the step-by-step introduction of alterations so that they can be successfully integrated in the existing situation. The jury is of the opinion that the competition team has recognized and correctly interpreted the situation and implemented the program convincingly and logically. The semipermeable market functions as a filter between the road and the park. The roof garden is a further element of openness and provides fine views of the Parvis and the church. The jury liked the loose, imaginative arrangement of the living units along the surrounding galleries, which are reminiscent of a barricade of wagons and create varying private and semiprivate spaces. This access system has light and dark, noisy and quiet sections, with airy niches for different purposes. Conventional, closed-in block structures have been avoided. The project is a successful interpretation of the philosophy of this competition.

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School: Lunds Tekniska Högskola, Lund
Lund Technical College, Lund, Sweden

Professor: Abelardo Gonzalez

Students: Lizet Blenke, Wojciech Borowczyk, Alejandro Call, Maeva Chardon, Alexandra Hammerl, Szymon Nogalski, Annie Petterson, Martin Sundberg
Based on the existing conditions of the site, eight steps, or phases, lead to the completed new center of Saint-Gilles.

In step four, the market on the Parvis is given a covering.

Terraces and pergolas provide access to the apartments. Thanks to their generous conception, represent places for communication.

The downward sloping terrain of the Carré forms the basis of an urban landscape.

The eight steps of the project finally constitute a new urban district for Saint-Gilles.
Six high-rise apartment blocks give Saint-Gilles a new silhouette, while the cultural facilities are accommodated under a huge roof nearby. But whereas the jury welcomed the – easily accessible – towers, they had some doubts about the project’s urbanistic quality.

Six residential buildings stand on the southern part of the Carré, the cultural and commercial facilities occupy the northern tip. The cross section shows the double-wall façade construction of the towers and the arrangement of the maisonette apartments. The diagram shows how the glass bridges connect the towers high above the town.

The jury was fascinated by the apartment towers’ high degree of adaptability and flexibility, something that is crucial for changing requirements of accessibility. Residents have the option of arranging their apartments within the given structure to comply with their respective needs. However, the jury was of the opinion that the plans – with the exception of the residential towers – were hard to read since they illustrate a thought process rather than presenting a completed design. Gardens, trees and watercourses connect the buildings with one another, but the relationship between the design and its surroundings is insufficiently clear. The jury regarded the conceptual and structural aspects as the strong points of the project rather than the contextual and urbanistic quality. Their verdict: a radical solution! •

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School: Politechnika Śląska, Wydział Architektury, Gliwice (PL) (Slezsko Technical University, department of architecture, Gliwice, Poland)
--- Professor: Jerzy Witeczek
--- Students: Małgorzata Burliga, Ewa Muca

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1 Silhouette
2 Six residential buildings stand on the southern part of the Carré, the cultural and commercial facilities occupy the northern tip.
3 The cross section shows the double-wall façade construction of the towers and the arrangement of the maisonette apartments.
4 The diagram shows how the glass bridges connect the towers high above the town.
A footbridge extends from the forecourt of the church over the Parvis and encircles the Carré, connecting all the public areas and providing the design with élan and continuity. The buildings, on the other hand, are somewhat ponderous, and the apartments, although spacious, are conventional.

The connecting element that gives the project by Jan Velek its name is the “footbridge.” The author proposes to unravel the stream of traffic on the Parvis de Saint-Gilles, directing cars and lorries underground at the Chaussée de Waterloo, and reserving the town level for pedestrians. From the forecourt of the church a ramp – the footbridge – soars above the Parvis, branches off to the right at the end of the Carré and then encircles it, continually ascending, on three sides. The footbridge is partially covered: a textile roof protects the Parvis from sun and rain, and the path along rue de Moscou leads through a forest of innumerable slanting supports that bear the residential building.

Two multi-storey apartment blocks on rue de Moscou and rue de la Victoire flank the sound-protected park in the middle of the Carré. Most of the single-storey apartments are spanned between the two longitudinal façades and are accessible to wheelchairs throughout. The two narrow sides of the Carré are framed by an art gallery on the hand and the multipurpose hall and a building accommodating a medical center and classrooms on the other. As a staged conclusion to the footbridge, a ramp winds round from the height of the second floor in five straight sections to the ground in front of the art gallery façade. A covered, flexibly exploitable square in the northern corner of the Carré serves as a forum.

A well-considered proposal
The jury liked the system of the – in part rather steep – ramps under or alongside the building. The footbridge connects all the public levels and endows the otherwise rather cumbersome buildings with a certain élan. The public space covers a large area. The jury felt that the ramps create a certain tension, but they also ensure a continuity between the Parvis de Saint-Gilles and the Carré de l’ancien Hôtel des Monnaies. They considered the transition from the roof to the ramp and the east end of the Parvis to be particularly effective. They also regarded the accessibility as sufficient, especially in the apartments, which, although generously designed, are somewhat conventional in terms of layout. The supports bearing the buildings separate the building volumes from the ground on a physical level. However, since a similar element bears the roofing of the Parvis de Saint-Gilles, the supports combine to form an element of design.  

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School: Technische Universität Wien, Fakultät Architektur und Regionalplanung, Wien (A)  
[Technical University, department of architecture, Vienna, Austria]  
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Professor: Helmut Schramm  
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Student: Jan Velek
Five units with shops, restaurants and apartments located on the Carré reflect the urban structure of Saint-Gilles on a smaller scale. The Parvis remains unchanged. Although the jury recognized that the authors had carried out thorough research into the urbanistic qualities, they were of the opinion that the project was rather too roughly sketched out.

The two students concentrated their work on the Carré de l’ancien Hôtel des Monnaies. The Parvis de Saint-Gilles remains – intentionally or coincidentally? – untouched. On the Carré, Christian Rayermann and Felix Tönnis worked with four fundamental elements: various levels, ramps connecting these levels, public exterior spaces on the ground and private exterior spaces on the roofs. The authors translated the urbanistic pattern of Saint-Gilles into a smaller scale on the Carré. Together with exterior spatial fragments and ramps, single- and multi-storey building volumes form a “structural element.” Altogether there are five of these elements occupying the Carré in different forms. Together, they form a section of a city within the city with multifarious, folded exterior spaces designed as parks and small squares.

Urbanistic quality, sketchy project
The competition jury recognized the high architectural value of aspects of the project such as scale and structure, development patterns and spatial quality. The two authors researched these values thoroughly and elaborated them in around thirty models. They have convincingly documented their ideas on urbanization in a book that promises to be worthwhile.

In the jury’s opinion, however, the synthesis has not been elaborated as thoroughly as the analysis. The project is simple and clear – a flexible string of buildings. Ramps are an integral part of the design, but they are often more of a sculptural than an architectural element. The jury criticized the lack of a proposal for the design of the Parvis and – perhaps as a result of this – the fact that the project is not integrated with its surroundings. The jury’s verdict: the design has unquestionably excellent qualities, but it does not provide sufficient information about the program. The project is theoretical and sketchy.

\[\text{\textcopyright\ School: Bauhaus-Universität, Weimar (D)}\]
\[\text{\textcopyright\ Professor: Michael Loudon}\]
\[\text{\textcopyright\ Students: Christian Rayermann, Felix Tönnis}\]
A fanned-out line grid structures the area of the Parvis and the Carré. The culture center and the residential buildings follow this zebra-like pattern. While this is not an obvious reaction to the urbanistic context, the jury nevertheless considered the solution remarkable and beautifully presented.

Although Saint-Gilles borders directly on the “Pentagon” enclosed by the small ring in the center of Brussels, the commune is nevertheless largely cut off from the center. This design by three students is based on this observation. Branching off from boulevard du Midi, the intention is to direct the people of Brussels through avenue Jean Volders to the Parvis de Saint-Gilles and on via the Carré de l’ancien Hôtel des Monnaies and rue Jourdan in the direction of place Louise. In this way, the center of Saint-Gilles, with the emphasis on the Parvis and the Carré, will be connected with the pulse of Brussels. The cars will be directed into a tunnel connected with the adjoining roads by means of numerous entries and exits and with access to a car park for 500 vehicles.

A fanned-out line grid—the zebra—extends over the whole area between the church of Saint-Gilles and rue de la Victoire. Both the square in front of the church and the Parvis, which is spanned by cables bearing lengths of cloth for flexible sun and rain protection, follow this arrangement. The culture center with exhibition rooms and a bar on the ground floor, more exhibition rooms on the first floor and the conference hall on the second floor are located on the Carré de l’ancien Hôtel des Monnaies, at the corner of the Parvis. A swimming pool and a sun terrace are placed at the top of the building, under the open sky. The floors are connected by ramps, but no stairs or elevators.

Rue de l’Hôtel des Monnaies, which also follows the zebra grid, is the scene of five tall, narrow residential buildings representing an analogy to the type of narrow terraced houses that is widespread in Brussels, with shops and offices on the ground floor. The zebra structures the space between the houses and the culture center in “urban areas”–an interpretation of an element of landscape that is typical in Belgium.

Remarkable and beautifully presented
The jury was of the opinion that although this project did not represent the obvious reaction to the urbanistic context, it nevertheless reflects this on the basis of the two buildings of the Saint-Gilles church and the culture center: the eclectic strength of the church is balanced by the secular, profane power of the culture center. The zebra-structured Parvis with the market place extends between the two buildings. The jury also recognized similar elements in the residential buildings: using the trick of rotation away from the street, structuring in five building volumes and a surprising change of scale, they assume the aspect of dream-like images of their constructed predecessors. “A remarkable solution and beautifully presented,” was the verdict of the jury.

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School: Ecole d’Architecture de Strasbourg
(Strasbourg School of Architecture, Strasbourg, France)
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Professor: Georges Heintz
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Students: Lionel Debs, Jean-Paul Meyer, Fabien Pihan
Sinking ship

The multipurpose hall as a fragment of a ship’s deck, the high-rise housing block as a symbol of the tree of life – it is with poetic images of this kind that Aleksander Katsitadze substantiates his concept. Nevertheless, the jury were of the opinion that the underlying spatial concept was sound.

Aleksander Katsitadze from Georgia based his design on a poetic notion: “The ship of freedom lies wrecked in a sea of dreams. With our own culture and our high moral standards we must become its passengers. The time is now ripe to recognize higher values in ourselves and to become more sensitive.”

The author extends the market from the Parvis de Saint-Gilles into the Carré. The enlarged market is the main axis of the center of Saint-Gilles. Beneath it is a car park from which the market stands are supplied via elevators. A dominant aspect of the design is the multipurpose hall, which Aleksander Katsitadze regards as a metaphor of “a fragment of the ship’s deck.” He interprets the ramps and elevators that lead to the multipurpose hall as the “road of life” for the people. The building is located on the eastern tip of the site, to the south of the enlarged market. The social premises are housed in an office block on rue de l’Hôtel des Monnaies. The building’s basement accommodates an entertainment complex with a cinema and marionette theater, an art café and a supermarket square. These premises are set in the terrain towards rue de l’Hôtel des Monnaies, and they are open on the side of the Carré owing to the downward slope of the site.

The twelve-storey apartment house is incised into the two-to-three-storey office building. The roof of the office building is designed as a garden for the occupiers and employees of the social facilities. The glass façades of the office building reflect the surroundings, and people walking round the building “can see the sky” in the reflecting surfaces of the high-rise building. Despite its twelve storeys, the high-rise building is lower than the Saint-Gilles church, and represents a symbol of the tree of life with its pylons supporting the balconies.

Sound spatial concept

The jury were of the opinion that these “allegoric escapades” are based on a sound spatial concept. This begins with the covered market place that extends the Parvis into rue Jourdan and continues diagonally through the Carré to the supermarket. All public functions are logically organized on the street level or accessible via long ramps and elevators. The jury regards the crossing of the space as an experience, particularly where the ramps penetrate the roofs of the public areas and open up onto breathtaking views over the roofs and streets of Saint-Gilles.

The jury experienced the expressive architectural vocabulary as unusual to say the least – almost as if it were from another world. But unrealistic as it may be, the project is proof of an artistic and uncompromising analysis of the surroundings. And, despite its explosive character, it really does comply with the premise of “Access for all.”

--› School: Architectural Institute Tbilisi, Georgia
--› Professor: Xojava Teimutaz
--› Student: Aleksander Katsitadze

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1 The public functions are located on the ground level on the Carré.
2 The author interprets the twelve-storey apartment building with the pylons bearing the balconies as a “tree of life”.
3 The expressive architectural vocabulary of the project is unfamiliar in Brussels and Western Europe.
Oriental dreams

A free-flowing network of paths and squares is reminiscent of an oriental souk, out of which three structures protrude. Vehement discussions ensued among the jury: “Surprising spatial quality” was one opinion; the project would “lead to more people with disabilities” was another emphatic view.

As the starting point of their work, Mathias Aström and Alexander Lusin established that the center of Saint-Gilles accommodates various spaces and functions that are fixed and separate from one another. The buildings on the Carré and the Parvis can scarcely be either altered or integrated. The two students wanted to soften these boundaries and create a mixture of different activities. On the basis of the surrounding buildings, they covered the Carré and the Parvis with a vibrant grid. This free-flowing grid forms the basis of a weave of different interior and exterior spaces, creating a labyrinthine network of paths that, sometimes broader, sometimes narrower, wind their way between the buildings. In places they widen out into small squares or flow out into the streets.

Three towers project out of these two- to three-storey structures: the vertically arranged market, the multipurpose hall and the casino. Elevators or ramps along the façades proclaim the aspect of accessibility, at least for wheelchair users. The rest of the facilities are accommodated in the flat buildings: shops and restaurants on the ground floor, as well as apartments bordering on private exterior areas. The structure is reminiscent of an oriental market – a picture that would appear appropriate enough in view of the composition of the population of Saint-Gilles.

Highly controversial

No other project in this competition was the subject of so much passionate and controversial discussion as this proposal. One member of the jury thought it represented a surprising and hitherto unknown quality of space, a continuation of blob architecture. Others argued that it was confusing, in particular for partially sighted and partially hearing persons. One member was even of the opinion that the project would lead to “more people with disabilities,” referring to the streets and squares in which partially sighted and partially hearing persons might have difficulty in finding their way around.

However, a small minority of the jury was impressed by the quality of the free-flowing space held together by three vertical structuring elements. The three towers were also described as “massive rocks in a turbulent sea,” and “transparent and fragile communication centers in a ‘jungle’ of inhabitable niches.” It was envisaged that this “jungle” would be the scene of every imaginable function: “delirious Brussels.” While being aware of the project’s obvious deficiencies in terms of accessibility, the jury appreciated the authors’ courageous attempt at seeking spatial solutions outside the well-trodden academic and practical paths.

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School: Kunsthochschule Weissensee, Berlin (D)
[University of Art, Berlin, Germany]

Professor: Wolfgang Scholz

Students: Mathias Aström, Alexander Lusin
Like furrows between geological layers, diagonal lines and uneven levels cover the Parvis and the Carré, with the buildings protruding like eruptions. But although the jury were enthusiastic about this poetic idea and its presentation, they felt that the urbanistic analysis and the aspect of accessibility were not sufficiently developed.

“Landslides” is the title of the weightiest of the Schindler Award projects: eight heavy, format A1 wooden panels put together as a collage constitute the design. The form – panels which, overlapping, can be joined together – reflects the content, for the three students worked with the tectonics of the site. Interstices and fissures such as appear in nature between the different layers of earth cover the competition area of the Parvis and the Carré rather like “tectonic layers.” The turbulent landscape forms the basic pattern for the development of the site. The edges of the interstices between the layers constitute the boundary between the different functions and levels; like eruptions, the buildings project out of the furrowed terrain: residential buildings, office blocks and public facilities. As in nature, the project “Landslides” evidences no parallel edges or right angles, the lines of the breaks and fissures are really bundles of crooked lines and uneven levels. The dividing lines between the buildings and the roads and squares are blurred – “Landslides” as a whole resembles a sculpture flowing from the highest point of the crossing between rue de l’Hôtel des Monnaies and rue Moscou through the Carré to the Parvis. But this sculpture does not merely lie on the level of existing roads and squares: its tectonic layers extend downwards into the ground. Thus, for example, a deep furrow with sloping side walls developed as the façades of shops crosses the Parvis. Sloping surfaces and ramps provide unhindered access in the direction of flow of this “tectonic sculpture,” while the wall panels rising at right angles set clear boundaries and permit passage only in specific places.

High poetic quality

The jury liked the project’s poetic quality and artistic presentation. It recognized an intellectual combination of the typical Brussels “Ilot” and the reminiscence of the home towns of many of the immigrants who shop daily at the market. They were, however, less convinced by the urbanistic analysis. The tectonic principle dominates all other aspects of the design, and it is difficult to evaluate the aspects of functionality and accessibility. But the jury was of the opinion that the project is worthy of further development, particularly as it could become a means of unity between the different cultures •
Conclusions and Recommendations of the Jury

The Schindler Competition ‘Access for All’ received a positive echo amongst the European Architectural Schools: 78 universities throughout the continent – from Spain in the West to Georgia in the East, from as far north as Lund to Venice in the South – submitted proposals for the site in Saint-Gilles, Brussels. Roughly 280 students completed their projects, about half of them underwent an internal selection process at their respective university, the other half were selected by our pre-jury, under the auspices of the President of the Grand Jury, Prof. Thomas Sieverts. In order to guarantee the same opportunity for all participants, these projects were divided into regional groups and then selected according to the rules stated in the amendment of the Schindler Competition and published in newsletter 2 and on our web page.

Pre-Jury and Grand Jury convened in Brussels, September 8 through 11, 2004. From these intense four days, we drew the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. The same paths for all people, regardless of their abilities!

   Designs which prevent disabled people from using the same paths and portals as their non-disabled companions use, are proof that ‘Access for all’ is not sufficiently embedded in architectural education. Only too often elevators and ramped access gates are hidden away. In the opinion of the jury, the apparent lack of profound solutions for this theme is less a consequence of the complexity of the given task, then that ‘Access for all’ is not yet an integral part of the curriculum at many schools. Many projects still deal with the topic exclusively on a technical and normative level, thus remaining additive and external rather than becoming an integral design element.

2. Trying out movement restrictions of disabled people helps students understand!

   A humanistic attitude towards equality can be stimulated and developed by the self-experience of practicing inabilities yourself; drive around in a wheelchair for some hours, use a blind folder or darkened eye glasses to simulate vision impairment. Plug your ears to experience how it feels to have a hearing disability. Promoting such experiences ought to become part of every architectural undergraduate program.

3. Experience of architecture for all and all senses!

   All people, regardless of their abilities, should be granted an equal right to experience space and urban culture. Specific disabilities should be balanced by offering alternatives for the other senses these people are able to use. For vision impaired people, special audio events or tactile adventures should be conceived. Visual signage or even olfactory elements help hearing impaired people. Even the sense of orientation of mentally challenged people can be improved by harmonious sensual experiences. The teaching of Architectural Design must be broadened greatly in these aspects.

4. Conformity of norms – variety of designs!

   The projects submitted to the jury bespeak the great variety between the building codes for disabilities and the vast differences between the norms and regulations applied throughout European countries. In the interest of disabled people and their freedom to travel, these norms and regulations must be streamlined and standardized. On the other hand, the variety of design applications thereof should be broadened and new applications encouraged. In this respect, the students’ work we received only hints to the direction in which we must go further. Nevertheless they indicate ways, how disabled people may participate in the spatial, urban and cultural experience.

5. Implementing ‘access for all’ takes patience, dedication and persistence.

   The competition shows, that a long path still lays ahead of us, until we will overcome the deficits in education of the ‘Design for all’. Competitions such as the one for the Schindler Award are a suitable means to get there.

Brussels, Sept. 11, 2004, Thomas Sieverts, Andreas Binkert
Interview: Jed Fraser
Photos: Schindler Management Ltd

Engineer Dieter Mehr looks back on 35 years of experience in the elevator industry. He is a member of a working group on elevators adapted for the disabled. In a talk, he discusses the role of vertical transport systems in the light of the requirement for “Access for all”, the various directives on the subject, and Schindler’s contribution to “Access for all”.

I share the opinion of the jury that the answer can only be “Access for all.” Planning for people with disabilities means planning well for everybody. The goal of accessible building is to enable all our fellow human beings to use the built environment independently and with equal rights. My recommendation is therefore always to look first at the overall situation, which means to imagine how people with various disabilities make their way from the street to their destination in the building. This procedure sensitizes and sharpens one’s awareness and makes it easier to identify potential barriers. For me as an engineer, the demands of “Access for all” mean designing according to the principle of “Design for all.”

What does that mean in practice?
The “Design for all” principle no longer focuses on measures for individual forms of disability, but instead on solutions which serve all users. The historical concept of “disabled,” which has often been restricted to users of wheelchairs, must be defined much more broadly. A mother with a baby buggy and a heavy shopping bag is just as limited in her movements, and in that sense also disabled. We should also not forget that people today are living to a greater age. With increasing age, mobility and the functioning of the sense organs diminish. So these people also need more and personal assistance.

What can an elevator specialist contribute to “Access for all”?
There is a small number of crucial points which must be taken into account:
Firstly, an elevator must provide sufficient accessible space for walking aids and wheelchairs.
Secondly, it must be possible for everyone to find the operating controls, to get to them, and to understand their purpose. This means that the controls must be reachable, and their designations must be clearly recognizable both visually and by touch.
Thirdly, everyone must be able to receive and understand all signals from the elevator. This last requirement means that the signals must be activated automatically so they can also be recognized by people with impairments to their senses of sight, hearing, or touch.

And is that enough?
Yes, even if it sounds easier than it really is. When doing these things, it’s important not to let constructional or organizational barriers obstruct the path to the elevator. There are many clear practical examples of bad design as ramps, starting with a step.

The jury mentions European regulations and their differing requirements. What is the current status in relation to accessible elevators?
It is correct that there were substantial differences in the requirements for elevators in Europe. However, in time for the European Year of People with Disabilities in 2003, a new standard was completed for the elevators which must be accessible to all persons including those with disabilities (EN81-70). This standard defines uniform binding requirements and replaces existing national regulations. In my opinion, there were two reasons why this standard was generally accepted: firstly, it provides a choice of three different types of elevator with different sizes (see illus-
and secondly, it enables supporting measures for certain types of disability to be activated only when it is necessary and required.

? What are these temporarily activated measures?

Allow me to explain that with two examples: So that people who only walk very slowly can enter and leave the elevator car without hindrance, the time for which the car doors stay open must be substantially lengthened. If this longer time is activated at every stop, it drastically reduces the transportation capacity of the elevator. By contrast with the traditional regulations, the new standard allows this longer time to be provided only when requested. For people with impaired sight, visual signals must be complemented by acoustic signals. When a visually impaired passenger arrives at their destination, this is announced verbally. If this function can be called up only when required, it avoids the irritation which is often caused by voice announcements in normal operation.

? How does such activation work in practice?

Temporary activation takes place, for example, by the user pressing an additional command button on the operating panel. However, present-day technology also allows many other different solutions.

? How is implementation of the new standard progressing?

The European Standard EN81-70 describes how an accessible elevator must be designed. However, it does not specify under what conditions such an elevator must be installed in a building. That is the job of the national building laws which have to create the necessary guidelines or modify existing ones. The three types of elevator which are allowed by the standard leave enough room for adaptation to national conditions.

? What sort of adaptations might those be?

As you can see in the illustration, the three elevators have different sizes so also differ in how user-friendly they are for wheelchair users. Guidelines now have to be created which specify which type of building should be equipped with which type of elevator. It is conceivable, for example, that the smallest type would be used only in small residential buildings, and the medium type for all other buildings. Less prosperous countries could perhaps also use the smallest elevator for other applications. With this possibility of differentiation, countries have sufficient flexibility to implement the standard in an economically and politically acceptable manner.

? So is everything now as it should be?

Not yet. The new elevator standard gives us a good basis. But there’s still a lot to do on the implementation. What’s missing now are harmonized building laws. Also, in some areas, the new standard only defines goals. In many cases, the engineering solutions for achieving them still have to be worked out. Here too, I totally agree with the jury: we still have a long and difficult way ahead of us. I should also mention that the “International Organization for Standardization” (ISO) is working on a new international standard which will harmonize the requirements for accessible elevators in the whole world.

? What contribution has the elevator industry made to improving the situation?

Based on my many years of participation in European committees for accessible elevators, I can state that all elevator manufacturers have made great progress with the accessible design of their products and contributed their knowledge to the standardization process.

? And Schindler?

The new standard leaves plenty of room for innovation which Schindler has made use of! Let me illustrate with two examples: Schindler was the first company to develop one of the most forward-looking control systems for elevators: the Miconic 10 hall call destination system. With this type of control, the passenger inputs his or her destination floor on a keypad on the landing before they enter...
Engineer Dieter Mehr has been working with elevators for 35 years. The elevator. As well as the benefits which this function has for normal elevator traffic, it is also ideal for supporting a passenger with special facilities or allocating a specially suitable elevator. The passenger can indicate those needs by pressing an additional button.

You must imagine that a passenger identifies him- or herself to the elevator control by means of a personal code, following which the appropriate functions are activated for the next trip. These functions are stored in the system for individual users, as well as for groups of users with similar needs. So in an office building, for example, the system knows an employee’s workplace and automatically initiates a travel command to the corresponding floor. In the case of a wheelchair user, the control system assigns an elevator car with sufficient space. The floor can be voice-announced in the passenger’s native language, etc. Once the passenger has reached their destination, the system is returned to normal operation. So you see, there are no limits to what we can imagine.

I think it’s obvious how well these solutions fulfill the criterion of “Design for all.” Every passenger – whether disabled or not – is provided with the functions he or she wants and needs.

So we finally get away from the frequently misunderstood demand for equal treatment of people with disabilities. It’s not equal treatment that helps, but rather the provision of correct, individual support, even when different individuals have conflicting needs. With the functions I have just described (SchindlerID), that is absolutely possible.

What simple advice can you give now to architecture students for their professional future?

It is recommended to use the term “obstacle-free” instead of “handicapped-friendly” since many people associate this earlier term with “Building for the handicapped.” This new term addresses the real problem in a general way. Every time a building is constructed for people, specialist building consultants as well as advisors on specific installations should be included in the planning at an early stage. In relation to elevators, Schindler is certainly a reliable partner.

During the European Year of People with Disabilities, Schindler was one of 12 corporate sponsors of the European Year of People with Disabilities (EYPD), which saw events across the European Union highlighting the requirements of all of us with special needs.

The innovations behind SchindlerID were recognized by the presentation of the European Commission’s “Breaking Barriers Award” for the services provided to handicapped elevator passengers. This award recognizes outstanding “Design for all” achievements made by European businesses and organizations that provide improved access for people with disabilities.

For additional information: www.schindler.com, www.schindleraward.com