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Revitalization of a bastion, Prague

Although using radical forms, MCA atelier’s structure remains almost invisible.

This project provides a solution for an area that is relatively remote from the vibrant city, not in distance but in character. Originally a tapestry of vineyards, gardens and hillside monasteries just outside the town walls, over the years it has fallen into disuse and become inaccessible, even though it is situated right next to the university campus. This architectural intervention has successfully injected new life into the area.

In 2001 – 2006, this section of the town walls underwent an essential restoration that was followed in 2010 – 2011 by the restoration of an adjacent bastion. All the works had to abide by the strict rules governing the reconstruction of historical monuments because this part of the town are part of the World Heritage Listed area of Prague protected by UNESCO.

The bastion had stood empty for decades. In 2007, its owner, the City District of Prague 2, invited entrants in an open architectural competition to come up with proposals for its future use. That competition was won by MCA atelier whose architects, Pavla Melková and Miroslav Cikán, offered a progressive, yet very sensitive revitalization of the whole bastion area, based on research into the site. In the 19th century, Prague’s ancient fortification system was transformed into public parks and this was the case for the bastion as well. Later on, a small facility belonging to a nearby hospital was built on the site. The contemporary structure by MCA architects replaced the walls of this ruined building.

The aim was to attract interest with the internal programme (café and a space for cultural events) not the outward appearance. Although the architects used very radical forms, the structure remains almost invisible from a distance. This effect is achieved by an intriguing use of the sloping ground, which allows the architecture to disappear partially under the ground. Moreover, the combination of concrete, steel plates and glass, together with the stone and brick walls and greenery delivers a visual effect based largely on local materials.

The typical ‘garden pavilion’ permits a variety of uses during the year. Several openings allow it to change its character and function. The glass walls at the front can be opened up, while the atrium behind can be understood as a kind of void. The architects call it a ‘negative tower’ as it is still possible to imagine the invisible vertical volume within the Cor-Ten walls that enclose the space and penetrate the roof. This detail is a symbolic reference to the history of the fortifications which included a tower on this spot.

The project also aims to connect the bastion with the surrounding greenery, creating a green district on a much larger scale. New paths from the bastion will open up the hidden spots and create recreational possibilities in this part of Prague. According to Melková and Cikán, the park will not only offer natural elements but will also contain statues. Whether this intention will actually be realized is still to be seen. As with many projects nowadays, it all depends on how the economic crisis develops.

The spiritual aspect of the past is reflected not only in the name, Bastion u Božích muk (Bastion at the Holy Shrines). An important ‘sacred’ moment in the complex is the shell of a small chapel that was excavated during construction works and that has become an integral part of the programme. This feature reminds people of the history of the New Town with its many churches and monasteries.

RESTORATION OF A BASTION, PRAGUE, 2007 – 2011
Architect: MCA atelier s.r.o.
Client: The City District of Prague 2
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