

# A timely lesson in the life and function of forms

## Exhibitions

By Fred Bernstein

DEPARTMENTS

### Young Architects Program:

**SUR.** Installation by Xefirotarch, in the courtyard at P.S. 1, Queens, New York, through September.

On June 26, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens unveiled its sixth annual summer installation aimed at making its courtyard a place to hang out—and ponder architecture's future. *SUR* (South) by Los Angeles-based Xefirotarch consists of a series of bright red, free-form benches that appear to be fiberglass, a second series of benches that look like concrete, and a series of canopies made of beige fabric stretched over frames of undulating metal pipe.

Four weeks later, the installation was in disarray. The smooth benches were blistered in some places. The rough benches were disintegrating, revealing that what appeared to be concrete was actually Styrofoam covered in a thick layer of paint. The canopies' Lycra was so badly puckered that countless folds and shadows overwhelmed the once-clean lines. The ends of the pipes were filling up with, among other things, litter and wads of gum.

Reached for comment in Los Angeles, Herman Diaz Alonso, principal of Xefirotarch, said he was aware that "some of it is broken." He mentioned the tight budget (\$60,000, provided by P.S. 1 and its affiliate, the Museum of Modern Art), inclement weather the week

before the installation opened, and high humidity that caused the Lycra to distend. But, he said, "There are no excuses. If this were a permanent building, it would be a problem. But for a pavilion, it's a valuable experience." He added, "I'm pleased with the result—in terms of what we learned."

### Cinematic design

In that sense, Diaz Alonso, a 36-year-old Argentinean who has worked for Enric Miralles and Peter Eisenman, has fulfilled the promise of the competition: By experimenting with materials and methods at an early stage of his career, he has learned lessons that may inform future commissions. The installation, he said, "is like a person. When you are 60, you have more wrinkles than when you are 20." His concept, he added, "is cinematic—it has to do with the grotesque."

Each spring, a jury that includes MoMA curator Terence Riley and P.S. 1 founder Alanna Heiss narrows a list of up-and-coming architects to five, who are then invited to submit proposals for turning the stark, concrete-walled courtyard (designed by Frederick Fisher) into a gathering place. The program—or lack of one—leaves plenty of room for improvisation. Some past winners, such as SHoP (2000) and Lindy Roy (2001), have created delightful, yet thought-provoking, installations with witty



The installation, shown when it opened (above and left), occupies the courtyard of what had been a school.

*Spiral Settee*) and a foam grotto by Aranda/Lasch of New York, both of which had the potential to seduce P.S. 1's summer crowds.

Xefirotarch's proposal, by contrast, promised an extraordinary dynamism, enough to make a Frank Gehry or Zaha Hadid building seem static. In drawings, the installation looked almost scary, like a high-tech skeleton stalking the courtyard. The drawings are similar to those of an unbuilt plaza Diaz Alonso designed

"urban beach" references, such as shallow pools for splashing, intriguing places for lounging, and unusual devices for shading.

This year, the finalists' proposals included a curving bench by WW Architects of Boston (cutely named

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for Lexington, Kentucky (included in the show *Tools of the Imagination* at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., through October 10). There too, he created tense, muscular forms meant to serve as benches, sunshades, and dividers. The description of the project—provided by Diaz Alonso—speaks of “defying gravity” while offering “flexible arrangements within which the narrative of the city can unfold.”

### The laws of physics kick in

But at P.S. 1, gravity and inflexibility rear their ugly heads. Diaz Alonso’s benches are so close to the ground that people feel uncomfortable sitting on them. The canopies provide only a modicum of shade, and they rarely converge in ways that create spaces where people want to gather. And when the “shades” stretch to the ground, there is a confusion of purpose: Are the

canopies suddenly perches? (One couple let their baby use the end of a canopy as a hammock.)

The architectonic language is also disappointing. The most ambitious element—the sunshades—lack an organizational coherence. Frames are inelegantly welded, and some Lycra covers are too short for the poles, while others are too long. Some pieces are supported at both ends; others cantilever, for no apparent reason.

Clearly, this scheme falls in the category of biomorphic—a.k.a. blobby—architecture. But the challenge of blobby architecture is to create new paradigms for design development and construction, while avoiding the usual repetition of rectilinear forms. Diaz Alonso hasn’t done that.

It’s true that, of the five finalists, Xefirotarch’s proposal was by far the most ambitious. Perhaps the judges



The piece looks like a high-tech skeleton.

should have prevailed upon MoMA to increase the construction budget. Indeed, once fabrication began, Diaz Alonso said, he knew that he would either have to shrink the project or turn to less expensive materials than he had planned. He chose the latter, and the built work did not hold up. The sense of movement evident in his drawings failed to make the tran-

sition to three dimensions.

Then, too, Diaz Alonso’s installation suffers by juxtaposition with *Greater New York 2005*, the summer survey show that fills P.S. 1’s indoor galleries through October. That show includes dozens of artworks that architects will find compelling. In one corner room, Tobias Putrih (born in Slovenia 33 years ago) has created an installation of stacks of corrugated card-

board carved into oversize vessels. The thinly sliced corrugated material is almost gauzy; the view through multiple layers hypnotic—think cardboard moiré! Putrih’s art, unlike Diaz Alonso’s architecture, isn’t subject to rain, high heels, and chewing gum. Still, he has created a new building system, and it is dazzling. ■