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Cardada—Reconsidering a Mountain

When the cable car from Orselina to Cardada had to be renovated after years of service, the question arose as to what people actually expected when they visited this mountain.

So begins the story of a poetic and personal engagement with place documented in the EDRA/*Places* competition submission by landscape architect Paolo Burgi of Camorino, Switzerland. More than any other project, Burgi's typified the issues jurors wrestled with this year. Specifically, it brought into focus the EDRA/*Places* Awards requirement that entries document the research background that was useful in designing or planning a project, or pose the research questions the project raises.

Burgi's project involves a number of interventions in the mountain landscape around the Cardada tram near Locarno. According to Burgi, their purpose was to "examine the question of whether fascination can lead to a greater and more profound respect for the environment."

Now, instead of riding the tram up to the 1340-meter station to look passively over the hills and Lake Maggiore, visitors encounter various constructions that afford them the chance for a more meaningful engagement with the Swiss mountain landscape.

Burgi describes his project as a series of personal responses. Among these are a walkway of steel and titanium suspended in the trees, leading to a viewing platform. Along the way, visitors discover symbols and brief explanatory texts highlighting the fragility of the environment and its changes over the centuries.

There is a "meeting place" at the entrance to the upper tram station, which incorporates a "severe" geometrical paving design, a fountain and a bench. New paths lead from the tram station and incorporate strategically placed benches and other sculptural elements that force hikers into visual encounters with the area's trees. There is also a "play path" containing unusual game equipment designed to heighten appreciation of natural processes.

Another design intervention is a "musical wood," where speakers in the trees mysteriously animate a small meadow. A "laminar" waterfall, in which water will cascade down a metal staircase, has been proposed for the base of the tram.

Above: "The Geological Observatory." This platform, at the top of the cableway, explores a profound geological convergence. A red line marks the line along which the European and African tectonic plates meet, and stones brought in from the mountains on the horizon are set into the platform.

Below: "The Landscape Promontory." This suspended passage, made of steel and titanium, rises up through the trees to a lookout platform that provides an unexpected view of Lago Maggiore.

Photos courtesy Paolo Burgi.

Finally, visitors can ride a chairlift (used for skiing in the winter) from the Cardada station to an observatory atop the nearby 1670-meter Cimetta Peak. The observatory, which has the form of a disk slicing through the mountain rocks, aims to reveal and interpret the geological forces that created the place over millions of years.

When Burgi first visited the mountain, he recalled it had the character of an urban periphery, where "small but disturbing interventions" detracted from the ability of visitors to perceive its natural qualities. His goal was to reconstruct the place so visitors could once again "marvel instead of limit(ing) ourselves to a reductionist and aesthetic contemplation . . . that makes nature a mere panorama."

—David Moffat

Jury Comments

The following discussion, about the design project "Cardada—Reconsidering a Mountain," took place on the second day of the 2002 jury. The project, which was not chosen for an award, is documented on the preceding pages.

Fraker: One thing I hope we can stress in what is published about these awards is that an aesthetic experience can be a powerful, emotional, social experience. There is a stereotype that high, poetic design is not research based. That upsets me, because that has not been my experience. Yet, unfortunately, you have in the contest for the limelight, some people who like to criticize high-end design as irresponsible. And, vice versa, designers like to criticize projects that are heavily behaviorally based or research based. This awards program ought to get right in the middle of that stereotype and try to address the complexity and difficulty of the issue.

Rabaim: There are certainly many designers and academic researchers who are concerned about high design not being responsible. On the other hand, the question is whether this awards program should be where that issue is tackled. As beautiful as I think the Cardada project is, I am concerned about giving an award from this program to a project that is a complete and singular vision of an individual.

Calthorpe: Hold on a second. I thought we had already cleared this up. I thought we were going to give awards that were not research based but were good placemaking—that those were parallel criteria.

Bressi: The point of the research requirement is to demonstrate that one is searching for knowledge, that one is



aware of where knowledge is coming from, and that one is trying to incorporate knowledge into design. We are not trying to suggest that people should unquestioningly follow research. But design entries should demonstrate some sort of knowledge basis, whether it's a scientific study or something else.

Quigley: On the other hand, you could argue that some wonderful innovations in all fields have come not because of knowledge but because of ignorance. So they weren't hampered by this channeled thought that the history of that particular view had. That would suggest that research is irrelevant.

Fraker: Or there may be cases in which the design outcome is based more on an intuitive hypothesis. What we are arguing about is different definitions of research.

Quigley: No, it's two separate activities. It's placemaking and research. In the Cardada project research may exist, but the author has given us no reason to understand this integration.

Calthorpe: I actually think the research is there. We all know from professional experience that when you go through an arduous approval process, you are getting community input. This project has been shaped by that phenomenon.

Quigley: I'd argue that during that stage, community input is not research. It's just consensus building.

Calthorpe: Then we will have the same problem with all the planning documents. Not all the planning documents are research based.

Bressi: Research base does not necessarily have to mean original research. It could draw from already-done research in an intelligent way.

Mozingo: That just makes things more confusing. Let's take the planning category. The people who submitted the better project must have done research at some point in their careers to really understand how you build cities in a way that makes sense.

Quigley: But was it research, or self education?

Mozingo: I don't know. I just don't think you can do good work without having read a lot, understood a lot, done some of your own research, and culled it through. Do we need entrants to say explicitly that they've done this?

Fraker: It is a requirement.

Brown: And that is why with some of the research projects, the outcomes that are claimed are so wonderful that I would dance on the table and argue for them to get an award except that they didn't demonstrate it in the documents. They didn't prove it to me. This would never pass muster with any social science group that is looking for how did you address the criteria.

Rahaim: Another way of looking at the Cardada project

is, does it rise to such a high level of placemaking that we want to ignore the requirement for some kind of more serious research?

Quigley: Yes, I would like to give this an award. But I'd like us to be honest about it, and say it is not research based, but it is of such high quality placemaking that the research requirement is less relevant. We were victims of poetry.

Rahaim: There are projects throughout history that are great personal visions of people who have extraordinary talent, and I just think we should acknowledge that this may be in that category, and stop trying to create the argument, which is totally unsubstantiated, that they did some kind of research.

Mozingo: If were to do that, would you be saying that there is a trump card? The trump card is beauty?

Rahaim: No, I think this is beautiful, but it is also placemaking.

Mozingo: I can't support saying, "Oh, by the way we completely changed the rules." If you are acknowledging that this does not involve research, I don't think we should give it an award.

Fraker: I am still going to argue that there are degrees of research in all of these projects. Although it's not well documented and not well written up, I think there is a hypothesis and the implication of research behind the hypothesis. You can argue with me, but I don't think we can say categorically as a jury that there was no research there.

Brown: I think we were more enthused about research being the unique edge of this competition until everyone saw this project, and now we are trying to back away from that.