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Estonian National Museum, Tartu

After ten years of economic growth at a capitalist tempo, the former Soviet Union still strikes the rest of the world as an exotic place, even a post-Soviet theme park. The regime that proclaimed utopia for nearly half a century may be gone, but it has left indelible marks on the local environment. The sensitive issue of recognizing and interpreting this situation became a key challenge of the architecture competition for the new Estonian National Museum. What was possibly the most important competition of the decade in Estonia, unexpectedly raised a number of questions related to the specifics of architecture, such as identity, genius loci and interpretation of recent history. It is a fair test since an architectural design provoked such a wide discussion in Estonia on architecture’s capacity to symbolize the nation’s complicated history.

The museum will be located on the outskirts of Tartu at Raadi, an old country estate where it stood before World War II. The setting is by no means picturesque; during the Soviet era the site was a military airfield (which meant that Tartu was closed to outsiders). It is impossible to ignore the aggressively nominal symbols of this past, but nearly all of the proposals did precisely that. The winning design, aptly named ‘Memory Field’, was an exception, uniting the history of the place with the ‘story’ told by the exhibits.

The international competition attracted 108 entries, of which only 12 came from Estonia. The jury, headed by Estonia’s minister of culture and including only one foreign member (Dutch architect Willy Maas), made a very bold decision in choosing the entry by three young architects, Dan Dorell (Paris), Lina Ghotmeh (Paris) and Tsuyoshi Tane (London). It envisages a 350 metre-long glass building, with an outdoor extension in the shape of a one-kilometre runway. Visitors are guided through the exhibition spaces of the greyish, one-storey building out onto an airfield receding into infinity: the ‘Memory Field’. This is a huge public space, a place for open air sculptures and outdoor events. The design has just the right amount of provocativeness and lyrical sensibility for a symbolic building; it is critical of its own and the same time demystifies museum building hierarchies.

The architecture of post-Soviet has been praised for being free and open to competition. The National competition proves this yet again. There have been some complaints that the work shamelessly turns the museum into an aesthetic object, but this is the nature of the National Museum expected to be both a storehouse of heritage and an international at-will entry/exit vision looks as it achieves its dual objective.

‘MEMORY FIELD’, THE NEW ESTONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM, 2005-2009
Architect: Dan Dorell, Lina Ghotmeh and Tsuyoshi Tane
Client: Estonian National Museum
Address: Raadi, Tartu, http://www.museum.com