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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