

urbis

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LANDscapes

the spaces between houses, buildings, suburbs and cities

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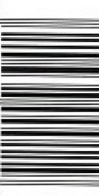
urban innovation

Swiss cityscape brings the indoors out



Cutting-edge island sculpture
Wine tasting in a desert oasis
Village life in the heart of Sydney

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red carpet treatment

Think financial district; think steel, glass and concrete.
The city of St Gallen in Switzerland has turned that concept
on its head thanks to an artist and architect who have literally
painted the town red. Story by Henry Crothers. Photographs
by Thomas Mayer Archive

The notion of the “outdoor room” has been popularised in recent years. This concept has typically defined landscape architectural works concerned with the creation of lifestyle or residential spaces for living.

In urban design practice, the demarcation of interior and exterior space has historically been a rigid one. The city is formed by the built fabric and by open spaces – the traditional interrelation of the solid (internal) and the void (external). However, the idea that streets, plazas and squares may function as a city’s living spaces is not a new one.

In recent years, a number of projects have emerged which blur the definition of indoors and outdoors, offer a more ambiguous urban condition that mediates between public and private and reflect the complexity of contemporary cities.

Saint Gallen, in eastern Switzerland, was founded in 612AD, when the Irish monk Gallus and a companion built a hut in the forests of the Steinbach Valley. This hut evolved into a Benedictine monastery that became one of the great intellectual centres of Europe during the 8th and 9th centuries.

A town was founded around the abbey, which became a major producer of linen and embroidered cotton fabric.





Today, the city is Switzerland's textile centre, and you can shop for quality embroidered goods at a handful of broderie stores.

The Bleicheli quarter, just outside the city's medieval town, was once home to many textile factories. The area later developed into the town's financial district, with modern banks and insurance buildings that owe more to Swiss pragmatism than civic flair.

And so, in an effort to make the Bleicheli more lively and attractive to pedestrians, in 2005 the City of St Gallen announced a design competition to invigorate its streets and open spaces.

The winning project, titled Stadtlounge ("city lounge"), was a collaboration between Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist and Spanish architect Carlos Martinez. It features bright red surfacing that appears to have been draped across the city centre, covering everything in its path.

Rist studied graphic design and photography and is well known for her filmmaking, video installations and projections. This project explores a different medium, but shares a similar sense of the graphic and theatrical. Martinez is an architect whose work more typically embraces the technological.

The Stadtlounge's red surfacing flows over benches, tables, and objects throughout the Bleicheli, establishing a continuous surface. The fabric gathers episodically to form planter beds, water features and sofa-like seats.

Communal tables and seats prompt social interaction and have provided locations for anything from boardroom meetings to meals among friends.

Cars and pedestrians share the surface. A red, rubber-like playground material has been used in pedestrian

areas, while street surfaces are paved in red asphalt. This new ground plane contrasts with the stone and concrete architecture of the financial buildings.

The Stadtlounge is divided into a series of different zones – street, sculpture, business and relaxation "lounges". In the street lounge, the ground surface folds over a car, transforming it from pedestrian hazard into art furniture. The sculpture lounge creates a more private ambience for the individual, while the business lounge extends the internal meeting spaces of the adjacent banking institutions. The relaxation lounge is the central gathering space for the precinct and provides the quarter's only significant vegetation, as well as a venue for performance.

After dark, the spaces are illuminated by orb-shaped lights which hang like pendants from cables strung between buildings, and the surface exudes a warmth more obviously associated with indoor nightlife.

Public art in cities is evolving from a culture of "plonk art" – art created somewhere other than where it is shown and "plonked" down in public space – to one that strives for integration. Much of the best work is intended to be ephemeral, and includes temporary installations and performance pieces. The Stadtlounge's bold statement blurs the boundaries between the relative permanence of landscape and the temporality of an installation. Rist and Martinez's work is provocative, and an example of a collaborative process and an integrated relationship between the disciplines of art, landscape and architecture.

The project acknowledges that the qualities of interior and exterior spaces are not always physically different – nor do they necessarily require different approaches, concepts or programs.

