Two Low-Key Young Architects With an Attitude, a Vision and Now a Prize

By ROBIN FOGELSSON

In an area that celebrates big-name architects and multimillion-dollar building projects, Gaston Nogues and Benjamin Ball offer a change of pace. One wears starched Cormen trousers and shirts with the labels cut out, and glasses; his studio is a three-car garage in the hip Venice section of Los Angeles that is taken up mostly by his building tools. Neither has yet turned 40.

That low-key business may change now that they have been named the winners of the Young Architects Program competition, held annually by P.S. 1 in Queens and the Museum of Modern Art. The seven-year-old program, in which architects submit proposals to transform the P.S. 1 courtyard into an outdoor musical performance and party space, goes a long way toward advancing a budding reputation.

Triumphing over the other finalists, Mr. Nogues and Mr. Ball designed a kaleidoscopic crimson canopy of reinforced Mylar laminae, with wooden utility poles and eave setting, that suggests nothing so much as the jeweled mardis of a hatted-open pomegranate.

"Imagine a Fellini-esque, low-tech circus tent with the canvas replaced by hallucinogenic red, orange, and amber silicon scales," said Alanna Heiss, the director of P.S. 1. "It seemed to us East Coast people really a present from the wilderness of California dreams."

As always, each team competing in the program would work within a tight budget ($30,000), limited square footage (1350) and a short time

A kaleidoscopic crimson canopy wins a competition.

table, they now have three months to build their creation. Opening day is in June 22.

In an interview on Thursday afternoon, a few hours after being notified of their victory, Mr. Ball and Mr. Nogues, both 39 - along with Paul Endres, their engineer, 43 - were playing it cool but also clearly eager to get down to work on their fantastical setting.

"We saw it as the opportunity to create something that is - what would the word be? - spectacular," Mr. Ball said.

Mr. Nogues added, "Spectacular and psychedelic."

Under the competition rules, the architects must provide shade, water and seating. The dome they fashioned is made of a material resembling theatrical light gel and looks "kind of a maraschino cherry," Mr. Ball said. They wanted the color to reflect well on the visitors gazing under.

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The architects Benjamin Ball, left, and Gaston Nogues, with the engineer Paul Endres, and the design that won Mr. Ball and Mr. Nogues the Young Architects Program competition.

But Mr. Ball and Mr. Nogues, who joined forces in 2001, are used to working on a shoestring and making structures that are not meant to last. Last summer they turned to sewing technique - patterning, sewing, draping - to create a one-night stage set for the opening gala of "Film and Bones: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture," an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Guests walked a runway to dinner through a swirving array of last year's T-shirts, polo shirts and frou-frou pajamas.

For Tiffany & Company's formal introduction of jewelry and accessories designed by the architect Frank Gehry in 2000, Ball-Nogues reimagined a closed section of Rodin's "Fall" in a Beverly Hills, designing walls, furniture and bars. One structure, curved like the human body, was constructed from 4,000 layers of corrugated cardboard sandwiched together. Live painted models wearing the Gehry jewelry were framed by peep-show-type display windows inspired by Marcel Duchamp's "Étant d'État.

"We do work that's based on creating an environment for people to interact with other people," Mr. Nogues said. "For people to have a good time in.

Mr. Nogues worked for Mr. Gehry for 10 years. Mr. Ball was once a set and production designer, working on the "Matrix" films, music videos and commercials. They met in the early 1990s while studying at the Southern California Institute of Architecture.

"They are contributing to a medium that is not quite architecture and not quite installation art," said Sylvie Lefebre, a professor in the architecture and design department at the University of California, Los Angeles, who nominated them for the competition.

Perhaps needless to say, the pair do not make a lot of money on the kinds of architecture they have been doing, and they continue to take side jobs, like building architectural models for other firms.

"We're scrappy," Mr. Nogues said.

Mr. Ball added, "And we're really poor."

But they're not complaining. Nor are they concerned about how they will afford New York housing in the final stages of this project.

"We're going to pitch a tent," Mr. Ball said. "In the P.S. 1 courtyard."

Photography by John Frosano for The New York Times