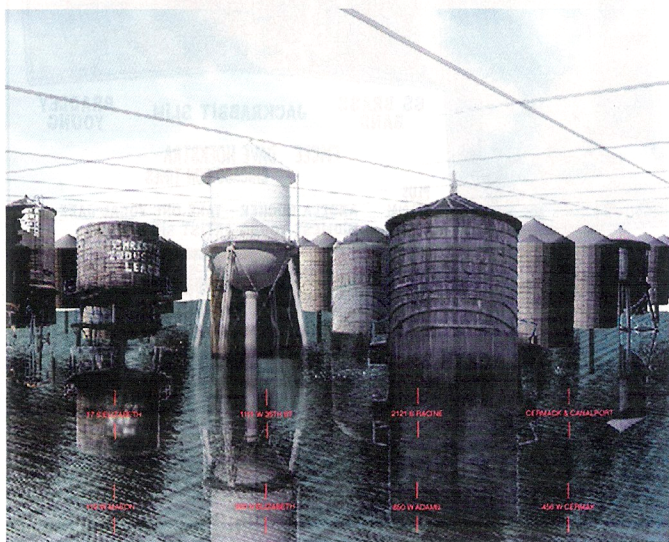


Tanked up

Architects and artists collect ideas for water-tank design competition

By Ruth Lopez



Untitled image from artist Francine LeClerc's third place proposal.

When it comes to skylines, ours is among the best. But, Chicago's architectural legacy includes more than sleek or historic skyscrapers. Equally important, and just as photogenic, are the utilitarian wood and metal rooftop water tanks installed by the thousands in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mostly for fire protection. While several hundred remain, it is estimated that only 130 still operate. That figure prompted city officials to support a design competition to promote their preservation.

"Water Tanks: The Chicago Prize," cosponsored by the Chicago Architectural Club, issued a call for proposals on the creative reuse of the distinctive structures, attracting 182 entries from 19 countries (51 from Chicago). The entries, along with a display of historical documents and images, are on exhibit at the Chicago Cultural Center.

Pritzker Prize-winning architect Thom Mayne announced the winners recently during an event at the Art Institute. Mayne was one of

12 jurors involved in an intense day of judging entries by architects, designers and artists who had entered with the "purpose of trying to solve problems in the urban fabric."

The jurors tried to establish criteria for their job but found, in the face of such creative output,

"I figured there was 10 years worth of work in that space."

that they had to shift every now and then. "One minute I am arguing for comprehension, and then we come to this one," says Mayne as he screens a slide of an anomaly—an honorable mention that consisted of a single image and a short statement.

For the most part, the entries were very involved and represented hours of thought and labor. Mayne says he tried to calculate the amount of time each proposal had taken to complete. ("I figured there was 10 years of work in that space.") Three categories emerged organically: ornamental/sculptural, ecological/nature and other. "It's a litmus test of what is taking

place at the time," Mayne says. There were plenty of bird houses and gardens-in-the-sky; a proposal for a cylindrical trellis from Portland was an honorable mention and the second-place proposal was for an urban bird-life refuge that was deemed the "most assertive and most inventive."

The first prize went to Chicago architect Rahman Polk, whose proposal involved harnessing the wind, which would in turn flip images and messages—an ever-changing public-service announcement. "You worked hard, man," Mayne tells Polk while handing him the \$3,500 award. Polk's plans were so detailed, Mayne says the piece could practically be built without any reworking.

The judges ended up looking at a range of ideas and they had to figure out if the proposals could solve the problems they raised. It didn't surprise them that most of the Chicago entries had pragmatic uses. There were some silly ones, too, as a recent tour of the exhibit revealed, like giant pop-art flowerpots.

Competitions are a rite of passage for young architects. It's how they build their portfolios and, more important, it's how they learn to design. This architectural charette (there are no city funds designated for the execution of these ideas) was also intended as an opportunity to raise awareness on preservation and get a public discussion going.

Nathan Mason, one of the organizers of the display at the Cultural Center, believes we are off to a good start. For instance, when the Swedish American Museum Center was renovating its Andersonville building a few years ago, it was encouraged

to junk its water tank and put in an updated, and costly, hydraulic sprinkler system. Museum officials reconsidered the old tank, which turned out to need only minor repair. "They found it was more cost-effective to preserve the water tank," Mason says. In the scheme of things, other building owners may come to the same conclusion. For purists who'd like nothing more than for the tanks to be left alone, this is good news. We like our skyline straight-up.

"Water Tanks: The Chicago Prize" is at the Chicago Cultural Center through January 29, 2006 (see Museums & Institutions).