**Whether revamping an existing place or creating one from scratch, the design of a public space always entails the ambition of enhancing urban life and improving the wellbeing of people. *All* people. Indeed, if the public nature of a space is to be activated, its improvement must benefit the entire population, ensuring that no group is excluded—or, worse, displaced—in the process. In a time of growing social inequalities, exacerbated by climate change and migration, how can we—designers, policymakers and critics—aim to create more just, inclusive, and liveable cities? How can we collectively foster stronger social connections, build vibrant communities, and cultivate a sense of belonging? The projects featured in this 12th award of the Prize offer insights into these pressing questions, reflecting the current state of practice across Europe and sparking important reflections on the future of urban transformation.**

## Providing basic amenities

The capacity of a public space to enhance people's wellbeing lies primarily in its ability to meet their fundamental needs. Sometimes, it is simply a matter of providing basic amenities which, still, are all too often lacking. For example, *Bench Invasions*, a performance carried out in Bruges, highlights the essential role that seating plays in our urban experience. Benches are more than just functional. They foster a sense of hospitality, transforming public spaces into places for socialising and lingering. But they also embody inclusion, enabling people with limited mobility to venture out and take part in urban life.

Through subtle attention to design details, such basic amenities can also become bearers of new uses. In the small village of Monte, which is characterised by an aging population, a minimalistic intervention—easing the slopes of steep paths and adding a handrail—provides better walking conditions for the elderly. However, this handrail also takes on a playful, multifunctional, and multigenerational role. Its design invites children to roll marbles through the railing and retrieve them at the bottom of the stairs. By focusing on the needs of a specific group, such as the elderly, this intervention enhances the village's overall hospitality, making it more pleasant and accessible for everyone.

The rapidly changing state of the planet and the evolution of society are constantly redefining these fundamental needs. With global warming, for example, we know how important the provision of cool urban spaces, as well as management of heavy rainwater, will be in the years to come. While these issues have become increasingly evident, my fellow jury members and I were surprised by how many of the 297 submissions we had to evaluate still overlook—if not ignore—them, raising the question: can we afford to continue designing urban spaces as we have been up to now?

## Caring for the most vulnerable

Making cities more hospitable also means addressing the needs of the most vulnerable inhabitants. This requires not only a thoughtful design approach but, first and foremost, a sound definition of the tasks at hand and careful selection of sites for intervention. At the turn of the 21st century, the development of public spaces focused heavily on prestigious locations—or those intended to become so—frequently resulting in emblematic projects that, over time, led to the increased value of certain areas and, ultimately, to their gentrification.

Recently, there seems to have been a shift in focus, with the rise in initiatives—often more modest in scope, sometimes community-led—that prioritise the needs of deprived neighbourhoods, with the aim of improving their quality of life rather than transforming them radically. Increasingly, examples of exemplary public spaces, such as the *Parc des Brigittines* in Brussels, ensure that everyone has access to areas for socialising, playing, relaxing, and cooling off, just a short walk from home. When they are designed with simple means—but with great care—such spaces allow the inhabitants to develop a sense of place, community, and belonging.

The choice of a site can also have symbolic significance, as illustrated by an initiative that has now been promoted for the second consecutive time in the history of the Prize. In 2022, the *SubstandardPLUS* project in Bucharest, which provided facilities for the homeless, had already captured the jury's attention. While the original project was located on the outskirts of the city, its successor, *Space for Solidarity*, submitted for the 2024 award, is deliberately situated in the very centre of Bucharest. This pilot initiative offers essential facilities—such as a changing area, a gym, lockers, electricity, a notice board, and a table with benches—catering to both homeless individuals and other users. With its domestic character and its vibrant, colourful style, it brings the issue of vulnerable populations into the heart of urban life, fostering a space that encourages interaction, shared territoriality and, hopefully, more solidarity.

## Open-ended designs

One of the main challenges for designers of public spaces, when it comes to enhancing urban life, is anticipating the potential future uses of a place. They need to equip spaces sufficiently for people to be able to use them, while allowing enough flexibility for unexpected forms of appropriation to happen, by avoiding overly deterministic design choices. However, achieving this level of openness is challenging, especially when clients or competition jurors expect a clear, well-defined proposal. Given the public investment in urban space and the political implications involved, there is often pressure to present projects that appear reassuring. Risk and ambiguity are typically discouraged in conventional design processes, yet they are essential for creating spaces that invite multiple interpretations and foster diverse forms of appropriation.

In this context, wastelands and derelict sites offer fertile ground for experimenting with open-ended design. Projects like the *Bijgaardepark Extension* in Ghent, the *Horta Provisional Market* in Barcelona, or the Exhibition Palace in Charleroi demonstrate this potential. These examples create flexible structures whose future programming and form remain to be defined and allow the final design to evolve through public or community engagement. This openness runs one risk though: that the space will ultimately be "privatised" through appropriations benefiting a happy few, while excluding many others. Care must therefore be taken not to compromise the very essence of public space, as the area evolves.

Openness can also manifest through innovative design approaches when working with reclaimed sites. In Warsaw, the re-use of rubble—leftover from WWII bombings—as construction material, along with preservation of the invasive vegetation that had overtaken the site, gives the *Uprising Mound Park* a raw, unpolished aesthetic. Upon completing the project, the designers realised that the unfinished character of the space enhances its inviting and adaptable qualities, encouraging people to invest it and act upon it.

These initiatives inspire hope that new forms of public space will find their way in our urban landscapes, creating opportunities for use, appropriation, and adaptation in an evolutionary perspective. They highlight the fact that, by its very nature, public space necessarily involves constant negotiation and, therefore, foreshadows future reconfigurations and adjustments. Consequently, the design (or redesign) of public space should never be viewed as a finality, but rather as a starting point, as an exploration of possibilities for an uncertain, yet desirable, common future.