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Building on the human touch

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The Emerging Architecture Awards honour the unflashy virtues of integrity and respect for the user

What's coming in architecture for 2007? Well, in Britain: nothing. Business is booming. The construction industry is swollen with money. There are cranes on every street corner. But it's just not how it used to be.

The constant supply of lottery projects a few years back lulled us into expecting spectacular civic buildings on tap. That has dried up, and until we really get going on the Government's school, hospital and house-building programme, Britain is awash instead with a commercial frenzy: luxury apartments, skyscrapers, office complexes.

Amid the dreariness and bombast, each year the AR Emerging Architecture Awards (AREAAs) offer a little snowdrop of hope. These, the biggest, and most international, awards for young (under 45) architects, have been going for years. But in the age of unquestioning devotion to icon architecture, the winners — usually unstarry, unshiny, ungargantuan, subtle buildings addressing very human, social, environmental needs — seemed simply perverse, fogeyish, betraying the enlightened, but rather un-*Zeitgeisty*, proclivities of their sponsor, *Architectural Review* magazine.

When there's a fashionable rising superstar's computer-generated, megabucks art gallery to lavish awards on, who would pick a little bridge or village school? This year, though, the awards seem not perverse, but stunningly prescient. China, Dubai, Moscow or Kazakhstan apart, there's a shift in many under-45 architects away from flash, if lucrative, bling buildings towards, what you might call — as the spiritual leader of this not-quite-movement, the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, does — “slow architecture”.

Like slow food, this is about local produce that tastes damn good. It's about that hard-to-define idea, integrity. Architecturally it means back-to-basics building: providing beautiful shelter, addressing human needs with architecture that has longevity and presence, undeniably modern but also showing that a human hand has been somewhere near it. Its response to the bombast, fakery and crash-bang-wallop of globalisation is radical.

In this year's gang of runners and riders in the AREAAs, for instance, you'll find not skyscrapers and bling but an elegant spiralling timber

sea-bathing lido in Denmark, a series of Buddhist monks' cells, threaded together by walkways high in the Thai jungle, a sharply modern concrete and rusted steel community tea house in Japan, and, in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, an astonishing transformation into public space of the crepuscular netherworld under the stilts of the city's buildings. This is tactile architecture, architecture that speaks of its social, environmental and spiritual obligations.

There is a big project, even, to dispel accusations of fogginess, a massive airport. But Dalaman international airport in Turkey counters the usual gloom of international travel with a float-away pavilion of the lightest concrete, timber and glass, decorated with soothing murals of rippling cornfields.

But it's this year's three winners that exemplify the shifting trends. The first is a pedestrian bridge across Lake Austin, Texas, by Miro Rivera Architects. It is hardly a landmark. You might not even notice it in situ, its slim basket of metal pipes and local stone, 100ft across, linking a guest house to the main house across the lake, almost camouflaged against the water's reeds, so small and delicate, so slight, as if woven by Texan elves.

In fact, the effect has been realised through the "nesting" of five 5in-diameter pipes that diverge from the spring point of the main span and the abutments. The pipes support half-inch-diameter bars, which act as both decking and guard-rail. This is a light-maintenance bridge whose man-made elements echo brilliantly its reedy natural surroundings.

The same Man-meets-Nature quality is threaded through the second winner, a literally "Handmade School" in Rudrapur, a poor, rural area of Bangladesh. The architects, Anna Heringer and Eike Roswag, may be European, but the school's construction demonstrates a splendidly enlightened approach to building in developing countries, eschewing imported, often energy-inefficient, materials and products, which usually benefit only developed countries, for local and traditional techniques and labour.

Instead of imposed alien materials, the architects chose local bamboo, loam, brick and straw. The lower walls are made from loam and straw trodden in by water buffalo, the top floors of a filigree of bamboo made using local techniques, but to a form that's undeniably modern and thrilling.

But my favourite is the third, as much for its humane agenda as the simplicity and elegance of its architecture. Sou Fujimoto's building is a treatment centre for disturbed children, a series of centres housing private, public and semi-private spaces tumbling across the landscape, apparently randomly, but each volume is arranged with the care vital to create spaces that might address the delicate behavioural and psychological conditions of their users.

These spaces, says Fujimoto, are "vague, unpredictable and filled with unlikelihood", shifting the balance of power away from the architect imposing form and towards the user. The powerlessness and paranoia beneath many disturbed children comes in part from a lack of control over their environment. So Fujimoto has created instead spaces that combat stress with clarity and calm, carefully orchestrated, but with enough freedom, variety and randomness for the user to choose how he or she wants to relate to them.

It is about, says Fujimoto, readdressing the primordial relationships between buildings and their inhabitants, back to the simple functions of spaces to enclose, shelter, give privacy or encourage openness: back to basics, if you will.

This is what real architecture is about, this and a word that you won't be hearing much of this year in China, Dubai, Moscow or Kazakhstan, or, indeed, Britain: humanity.

COMING NEXT: THE HOT BUILDINGS OPENING IN 2007

The Kolumba Diocesan Museum, Cologne

The latest work by Peter Zumthor, the king of slow architecture: bated breath all round.

La Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine, Paris

Its architecture has been decidedly dodgy since the 1980s, but the one thing France does well is big state building projects. Europe's biggest architectural museum is long awaited. In March it finally opens.

Wembley Stadium

Or will the refurbished O2 Centre, aka the Millennium Dome, beat it in June?

Royal Festival Hall, London

The refurbished concert hall by Allies & Morrison promises to return the building's revolutionary flowing spaces and improve the feeble acoustics. But will the changes please the heritage lobby?

More David Adjaye

The much touted Young Turk continues his starward trajectory away from the celebrity architecture of his youth towards socially responsible building with three British buildings: the Insitute for International Visual Arts, the Bernie Grant Centre and the Stephen Lawrence Centre.

***Emerging Architecture* is at the Royal Institute of British Architects, Portland Place, London W1 (020-7580 5533; www.architecture.com), until February 28**

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