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# In Favour of Public Space

TEN YEARS OF THE EUROPEAN PRIZE  
FOR URBAN PUBLIC SPACE

In Favour of Public Space



# Magdeburg

## Open-Air Library

KARO\* WITH ARCHITEKTUR + NETZWERK

[ JOINT WINNER ]

2010



## Books against Depression

PETER CACHOLA SCHMAL

When this small project was awarded joint winner with the Oslo Opera House by the jury of the European Prize for Urban Public Space, presided over by Rafael Moneo, I was not that surprised, as this delightful project has been stirring up quite a bit of press dust in Germany in the past years, while evolving from a grassroots installation into a real building. Members of the jury commented that this project just did everything right you can do right in architecture at the moment. This was viewed already as being a little suspicious. Are not so many politically correct ingredients a sign of a calculated strategy? But what are these ingredients? A small piece with an open social nature was built in the difficult district of Magdeburg-Salbke, a typically derelict and shrinking city in former socialist Eastern Germany, marked by a vacancy ratio near 80% and a high unemployment rate of around 20%. This project was planned with the participation and even enthusiastic support of the local community, including some youth groups. It recycles architectural façade elements. And it places books in its centre of attention, for 24-hours free use in the main public square of the district. And this impressive spatial object is not only a great success with the public but it also looks really good, it is elegantly designed and balanced, it is fresh and appealing to architects – countering the notion that grassroots projects generally have a dreary pedagogical image.

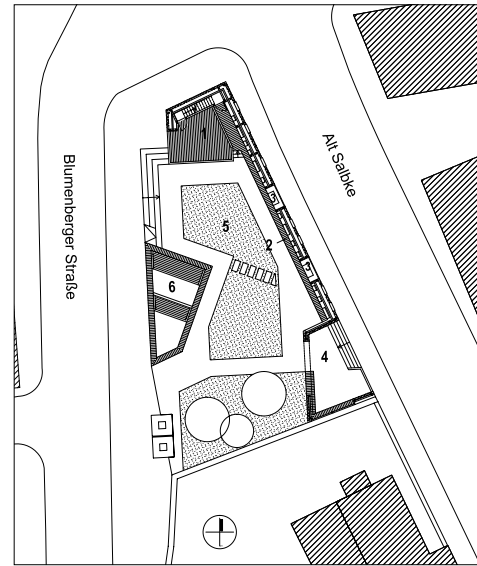
Yes, the Leipzig-based collaborative KARO founded by the architect and freelance collaborator at the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation, Stefan Rettich, the architect Antje Heuer, and the mechanical engineer Bert Hafermalz did everything right, but they also risked a lot. The genesis of the project that their authors describe as ‘situative urbanism’ shows a slow evolution rather than a strategic marketing concept at work. Like so many other derelict public spaces in Eastern Germany this one, too, is in danger of being taken over by bored and notorious right-wing youth gangs. But this project was not generated by a top-down approach that could later easily fall prey to negligence and vandalism – just the opposite. It was the result of a patient social intervention process that started back in 2005. For a few days the central square – where in

the 1980s the local library had actually been standing before it burned down – was inhabited by a spatial sculpture built out of 1,000 beer crates, following workshops of developing possible design approaches for this site together with the local community. Calls for book donations brought in around 10,000 books for this event that ended in poetry slam sessions and readings by authors. In the following years these book donations doubled in size and were used in an informal citizens' library set within a neighbouring unused store. The potential of the project managed to attract public funding within the federal government's program of 'experimental urban planning schemes', and the permanent building could finally be realized in June 2009.

The Open-Air Library, locally known as the 'Salbke Bookmark', comes very close to the very first beer-crate simulation, with its interior situated on the former central square well sheltered from the street. The beer crates have been substituted by aluminium façade panels that are not only iconic, as they stem from the shopping center façade system of the 1960s Horten chain – but they can also be read as a re-use of a typical Western consumerism symbol for Eastern social action. A small covered stage also serves a public function. Both the patio and the stage have been widely accepted and put to use by the citizens who have organized themselves to take care of their open library. The youth groups use the open space as their public meeting ground, since there is nowhere else for them to go in town. When the first attack of vandalism occurred recently, the people were aware of its meaning and defended their space. They organized the repairs and thus propagated a strong signal, that they would not tolerate such actions.

Stefan Rettich, the most public figure of Karo, stated that a lot of the recently emerging 'public spaces' in Eastern Germany are mainly leftover residual spaces in the urban fabric produced by the demolition of disused buildings without any favourable impact, pointing to the problem of the sustainable maintenance of these important spaces. With the Open-Air Library, Karo found a very original answer to this topic that is both convincing and invigorating. Therefore this project rightly deserves the 2010 European Prize for Urban Public Space, as it is exemplary for all other European cities faced with the problem of shrinking.

*Peter Cachola Schmal, director of Deutsches Architekturmuseum (DAM) in Frankfurt.*



General plan. 1. Stage / 2. Bookwall / 3. Seating unit / 4. Youth-corner / 5. Lawn / 6. Terrace

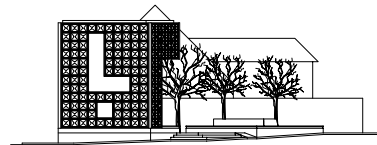


Like so many other urban zones of East Germany, the district of Salbke in the southeast of Magdeburg is sunk in deep physical and social dereliction. The unemployment rate is high and its post-industrial landscape is scattered with abandoned factories, empty lots and a large number of vacant business premises and homes. In this setting, the site of the district's former library saw, in 2005, the beginnings of an urban planning experiment called 'City on Trial', promoted by the residents themselves. The abandoned premises of an adjoining shop were used as a working space for organising the book collection and to draw up, in an open and neighbourly participative process, the programme for designing a new open-air

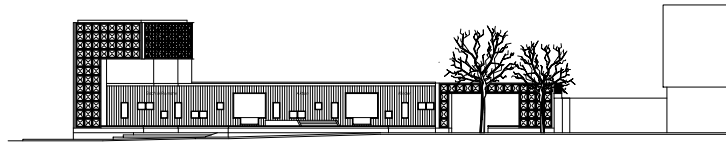
library and listing its needs. Some 20,000 books were collected and, with over a thousand beer crates, a 1:1 scale model of the resulting proposal was constructed on the site. This then became the venue for a small poetry slam and readings festival. The success of the initiative helped to procure from the Federal Government the necessary funds to construct the facility, which was opened in 2009. Prefabricated pieces from the façade of a recently demolished 1960s building now shape a thick wall that holds the bookshelves. The wall, topped by a higher section that houses a cafeteria, shelters a green space where people can read in the open air and there is also a stage on which primary school plays are performed, public readings are given and concerts by young people's bands are held.

Open 24 hours a day, the facility is managed by the residents who, without any kind of monitoring or checks, freely take and return books. Although there has been the odd episode of vandalism, testifying to the tough surroundings, the new library is fully-functioning. The residents have taken over a run-down space to turn it into an innovative meeting place that, with its powerful iconic charge, rises as an emblem of a more promising future for Salbke.

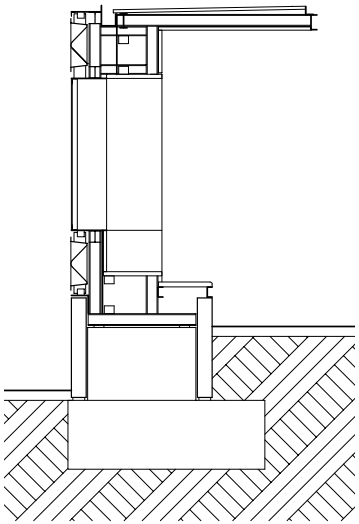
**PROJECT Open-Air Library, Magdeburg, Germany**  
**DATE 2009**  
**AUTHORS KARO\* with Architektur+Netzwerk**  
**SURFACE 488 m<sup>2</sup>**  
**COST 325,000 €**



North elevation



West elevation



Section detail

