

Building a new kind of art festival tent

Design competition for a temporary outdoor gallery space debuts at Art City Austin.

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Three years ago, Art City Austin, a weekend downtown spring arts fair and festival, had a little wake-up call from Mother Nature. A classic Texas spring storm brought high winds the night before the festival started. With nearly 200 artists and their work housed in display tents, the festival site narrowly missed being an art disaster area of blown-down tents and destroyed creativity.

That incident got leaders of the Austin Art Alliance, the nonprofit mostly volunteer organization that runs the festival, thinking. What if we asked architects and designers to create a temporary outdoor gallery space, something sturdy yet portable and affordable? With the group dedicating its fundraising proceeds to the Austin Museum of Art and the Blanton Museum of Art, sponsoring a creative competition seemed like a good fit.

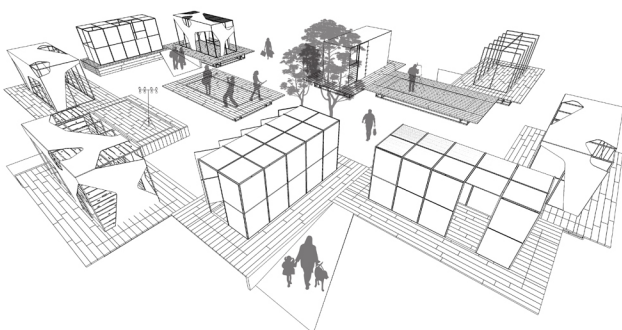
Partnering with the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects and Austin Foundation for Architecture, the Alliance last year launched the first Temporary Outdoor Gallery Space (TOGS) competition. Some 139 submissions from designers in 26 countries came in. Architects Amy Wynne and Mark Leveno of Los Angeles netted the first-place honors with a sleek functional modern-looking mini-gallery that they dubbed "A Little Room."

And that means a prototype of their TOGS will debut at Art City Austin this weekend. Look for the prototype of "A Little Room" at Cesar Chavez Street near Austin City Hall. Later this year it will head to New York to exhibit with the New York chapter of the AIA.

We asked Wynne and Leveno about their design process; they spoke as a unified voice via e-mail.

American-Statesman: What was your inspiration for 'A Little Room?'

Wynne and Leveno: The design for "A Little Room" is inspired by two major ideas. The first relates to the structure being something that is repeatedly taken apart and rebuilt. Those moments of reconstruction offer a unique opportunity in architecture — to rebuild it differently each time.



The second idea was to rethink how artists display their work. Typically an artist is constrained by the existing gallery space — the lighting, the wall materials, etc. We wanted to create a gallery in which the artist has the opportunity to create a space that is specific to their work. These two ideas converged in the idea of a simple frame with removable wall panels. Artists then have the option to configure the panels however they wish — opaque, translucent, open, white, black, colored, painted upon, textured, etc. Each time the gallery is configured, it becomes an extension and representation of the artists and their art displayed inside and out.

What do you hope 'A Little Room' can teach people about architecture and its possibilities?

Architects are taught to think creatively as well as critically about the design. Our goal as designers is to identify potential opportunities to do something innovative that will enhance the aesthetic, experience and functionality of a piece of architecture.

While there are endless solutions to every design problem, the best ones usually surprise you. We hope that people look at "A Little Room" and think that it is beautiful, intelligent and inventive. Ideally it will inspire other designers to think hard about the design opportunities embedded in even the simplest situations.

In regards to transitory architecture, we thought hard about what it means to ship a small building from place to place. The ability of our gallery to pack completely into its base structure to be shipped is essential to the overall idea of the gallery. It means we are creating a space with no waste and a compact efficiency.

Every element in this project is pared down to meet the most basic requirements. The inherent beauty of "A Little Room" comes from having a sophisticated system conveyed through a minimalist form.

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