

The Christo and Jeanne-Claude Center in Gabrovo: New into Old as a Cultural Experiment

And how to combine an architectural competition with a series of school assignments?

July 1, Saturday, 18:00, [the courtyard of the Bulgarian Pavilion, Biennale Architettura 2023, 18th International Architecture Exhibition The Laboratory of the Future, Venice](#)

panel discussion with:

Andreas Ruby, director, [the Swiss Architecture Museum SAM in Basel](#)

Aneta Vassileva, architect, architecture critic and historian, professor at [the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, Sofia](#)

Erich Schoenenberger, architect, adjunct assistant professor at [Pratt Institute](#); director of [su11 architecture+design](#)

Katrine Daugaard Jørgensen, architect, head of transformation at [Henning Larsen](#); consultant of the design brief for the architecture competition of the Christo and Jeanne-Claude Center in Gabrovo

Tania Hristova, mayor, [Gabrovo Municipality](#)

Vladimir Yavachev, operations and project director, [Christo and Jeanne-Claude](#)

The discussion is preceded by an introduction to the functions and programme of the Christo and Jeanne-Claude Center by Margarita Dorovska and followed by a guided tour in the exhibition "From Darkness to Light" in [the Bulgarian Pavilion](#), led by its curator, architect Boris Tikvarski.

An organization is a process. Buildings and their environment, contrary to popular perception, are a process, as well.

The Christo and Jeanne-Claude Center is a dream, a 32-year-old dream of a group of people from Gabrovo, where Christo was born on June 13, 1935. A dream that has meandered, accelerated, sunk, and now is taking off (not unlike a Christo and Jeanne-Claude project).

Today this dream has a 12 000-square-meter shell – a former textile school, which in its best years housed more than a thousand students, trained to feed into the main industry of the town, the same industry that brought Christo’s father to Gabrovo and provided material for many of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s projects.

Today, the Center is the subject of a myriad of conversations attempting to decode Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s practice and his upbringing in Gabrovo, the needs of artists and diverse local communities and groups, and to recode them into disparate functions of an exhibition and production site that would bring together contemporary art, textiles, architecture, design and urbanism, environmental studies, social history, engineering, and entrepreneurship.

Can an architectural competition turn this shell of a building into a home in one bite? What do the present and future of competitions have to offer to this effort? Can one solve problems yet leave behind enough of them to be devoured in a convivial atmosphere of gradual learning and invention — in an experiment that takes competition culture one step further?

This discussion is an attempt to find a middle ground between what experienced architectural studios can do and what architectural schools can offer, providing space and time for informed, expert, and intuitive contributions from a broad community. Architectural competitions can be a process rather than one-off events, and buildings can be repurposed and remodeled in an adaptive and inclusive way.

This approach seems especially adequate in a city, challenged by demography and for a project, whose stakeholders ambitions and resources mismatch. The Center is attempting at organic development and prototyping many of its future functions within the building in its current state, prior to refurbishment. Hence, some of the functions and their spatial requirements will be confirmed before the competition this autumn, while others will remain open-ended and could become school assignments for architecture students in the following years.

At their best, cultural organizations can only hope to stir up and manage energies, while architecture can possibly accommodate and nudge them.

The Christo and Jeanne-Claude Center organizational development and architectural competition planning receives technical support from Ramboll Management Consulting through the [“Support to New European Bauhaus Local Initiatives” Programme of the European Commission.](#)

The event is realized with support from [America for Bulgaria Foundation.](#)

The former textile school in Gabrovo, 2021. Photo: Rosina Pencheva. © The Christo and Jeanne-Claude Center, Gabrovo