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FORUM

The Copenhagen opera house



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The winning interior design for 2004 is that of a gambling arcade. Not like in Las Vegas with kidney shaped bars and carpeting blue as a swimming pool and deep enough to twist your ankle. On the contrary. Bare and brutalist, *Matrix* rather than *Casino*. Even if one-armed bandits at Gamer's Paradise in Malmö are far more numerous than you spot at first – blast away that rotter with your Zig Zauer gun nestling at the bottom of the screen! *Hasta la vista*.

Counter Strike, Battlefield, Warcraft – Gamer's Paradise is an arcade for computer games. Most of these are what are called »First Person Shooters« where you as first person travel through various spaces and corridors with your weapon in hand. These spaces are dark and claustrophobic, like some military bunker. Or just like Gamer's Paradise in fact. Abelardo Gonzalez, the architect, has skilfully analysed and copied the typical aesthetics of these games and turned fiction into reality. With the help of (much) sound, (little) light, of raw concrete and a rigidly simplified lay-out, he's created a physical space which adds to the ambience of the games. And he's succeeded in doing this with such zest and conviction that this species of sub-culture is elevated to a status of elegance – great architecture where you would least expect it, in the company of baseball caps, military jeans and Caterpillar boots.

Does the fact that Gamer's Paradise is the winner of *Forum's* prize for best interior design for 2004 say something about the time we live in? Is it so that we're more pessimistic now than we were in 2002 when the jury were charmed by cherry-trees and ballerina lamps for the Arlanda VIP lounge? On the contrary. Jonas Bohlin's staggeringly beautiful lounge was a direct reaction to the terror attacks of 11

September. A Nangijala where each visitor is checked out – x-rayed – to keep Tengil and Katla at bay. Gamer’s Paradise on the other hand admits everyone, all the time, 24 hours a day. The atmosphere is relaxed and what may hit you at first as a whiff of sweat and acne ointment is in reality the breath of the future. The future of architecture. The players move in a state of wonder through virtual worlds sketched out in visionary stylistic mixtures: neo-classicism confronting Le Corbusier meeting eco-architecture. For the players such minglings are everyday fare and will become more so for us too. Abelardo Gonzalez’s design for Gamer’s Paradise displays this pioneering spirit.

The contest for »Sweden’s best interior design« is still today the most extensive of its kind in Scandinavia. This year the international jury had 46 designs to choose between, all of them produced by interior architects in Sweden between 1 October 2003 and 30 September 2004. The task for the jury was to select from the anonymous entries the three to qualify for the Gold, Silver and Bronze diplomas.

Gamer’s Paradise, Sandellsandberg’s headquarters building for the OMX Stock Exchange, and the Swedish Post Office HQ by BSK arkitekter in collaboration with Dudley Böhm arkitekter – these are the three interiors finally chosen by the jury after a strenuous day of emotional argument and controlled analyses. These three are all instances of an architecture which by making use of every available means of expression manages to create spaces of strong and unique character. They represent the most vital creations from Sweden in 2004.

Forum’s editorial offices, Stockholm, January 2005

THE JURY

Detlef Rahe (chairman) – designer and architect from Germany, head of the Institute of Integrated Design and professor at the Hochschule für Künste, both in Bremen. He has his own design firm, rahe+rahe.

Kaisa Blomstedt – interior architect from Finland. Since 1970 active in France, Germany, Great Britain and Italy, among other countries. She is one of the most highly prized architects in Finland.

Andreas Engesvik – furniture designer from Norway. One of the three partners in Norway Says and winner of this year’s Bruno Mathsson prize. He is represented at (among others) the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

Johan Fowelin – Swedish photographer and artist. His advertising campaigns have included those for Harvey Nichols and Polaroid and he has exhibited at Moderna museet, Stockholm. A regular contributor to *Forum*.

Maartje Lammers – architect and designer from the Netherlands. Until three years ago she was partner of EEA with Erick van Egeraat before she decided to start her own firm, 24H Architecture.



GATE D
105-112

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1. Gamer's Paradise

ABELARDO GONZALEZ ARKITEKTBYRÅ THROUGH ABELARDO GONZALEZ

The work of Abelardo Gonzalez, from Argentina, deals only to a limited extent with leopard skins, plumes and Medusa hairstyles. At Gamer's Paradise he has done exactly the reverse, stripping himself down to the most basic building blocks and with them fashioning a space that speaks louder than anything he has so far created in his 25 year career. Starting out with a bone-dry lay-out he has transformed the characteristic claustrophobic spaces of computer games into a convincing reality and has exploited the shelter's original pre-conditions to the full. In addition to which Gamer's Paradise is a logistic dream: the arcade has 120 computer screens and is open 24 hours a day, yet can be run by just one person. Masterful!

Entry tunnel with green neon lighting and rhythmically repeated strips of light in walls and ceiling. Terminates in a mirror wall with built-in surveillance screen. **Opening spread:** the games hall with black modules in long lines interspersed with server towers.

ABELARDO GONZALEZ goes in for tunnels. Out of sight and out of view. There's something odd about this; a man with leopard-skin armchairs in his sitting room and a lion's mane on his head, who designs celebrities' villas that no photographer is allowed to see and who hides interior decors of gigantic Egyptian masks and futuristic gaming screens in a setting underground that you'd never dream of in your daily stroll through the familiar city scene.

Gamer's Paradise is housed in a hollow beyond the observable world. It's next to a parking garage, and within the space of 48 hours can be transformed into a shelter to become part of a two-storey emergency hospital, planned by the defence authorities for this 1970s urban district.

You enter through a tunnel, a tunnel which led at one time to a discotheque and later to an antique auction gallery and which now is dark and secretive and long and green-glowing as if it descended to another world.

I move in the direction of a vast mirror at the end, spot myself in a monitor and hear accelerat-

The tunnel is dark and secretive and green-glowing as if it descended to another world

ing 60s rock in the loudspeakers: »One pill makes you larger/And one pill makes you small.«

Jefferson Airplane. I choose one of the gates A-E. »Go ask Alice/When she's ten feet tall.« One hundred and twenty departures to choose from, 120 computers. A blackened, crouching cluster of machines, as if Mårran from the *Mumin* books has been cloned with screens filled with upside-down tales from Wonderland. Now »White Rabbit« is near to crescendo: »Feel your head«. All is insulated. Those outside know nothing and those in here exist within their earphones.

Can it be that Abelardo Gonzales arrived here through a tunnel? By pneumatic tube perhaps, from one pole to another? From his homeland Argentina where he studied architecture and theatrical design in parallel, via Poland of the late 70s with their exciting art and theatre and their frightful buildings, and finally to the city theatre in

Malmö, where the stage was big as a football field and he was given free rein. First it was *Othello*, the ballet version, and then Chekhov.

»I think in film terms, in sequences,« he says. »Sequences and movements. When you move about in a room you're gathering images the whole time. My head is like a camera. The tunnel links two different worlds, the real one and the unreal. Now and the future. The tunnel at Gamer's Paradise is a fantasy space and beyond it lies something of a futurist creation. The idea is that you should feel a little of the same effect as in a computer game; when you start to accelerate, you run and somebody pops us behind you. The acceleration here is marked by the vertical lights and the rhythm they create. And then it ends in a large hall with all the machines. The tunnel has no other function than as preparation: it poses the question what's going to happen?«

Many of his projects are near one another, a few minutes walking distance apart in central Malmö. There are restaurants, discos, rock clubs. His home sits high up across the street from

Gamer's Paradise. And opposite his bulging office (where he squirrels away design magazines and must wonder how he's going to squeeze more sketches into the drawers) lay previously the 80s rock spot, Ove's, furnished by Gonzalez in leopard-skin pattern and stainless steel. Here Prince's high heels once echoed.

But go to the gambling hall in the bunker and you arrive in another era. Now it's all sub-culture and animation, aesthetics in which the fantasy graphics of computer games confront neon shadows and naked concrete. Can one imagine a more fitting environment for *Half-Life 2* *Deathmatch*, *Counter-Strike Source* or *Battlefield Vietnam: Point of Existence (Mod)* than this bunker beyond time and space? Even the exit signs look as if they're part of Gonzalez's designs.

»Recently I've been giving special study to films like *Matrix* and *Blade Runner*. It's interesting with that kind of science fiction, where they have

settings which look like today. Tattered present-day environments in which there's nonetheless something suggestive of future time. It's future time not 3000 years from now but what could all be happening in two years or so.«

Gamer's Paradise is a rectangular space 90 by 20 metres. The game consoles stand there in black rows with classy armchairs fronting the screens. The place is open 24 hours a day, and access is automated. Instead of tax-free there are sandwich and soft drink machines. You feel yourself sucked in, in towards the gloom and the light and a cement wall lit by neon. When the outer door shuts you're enclosed; somewhat disorientated you struggle to find your footing in the virtual. And everywhere, in every detail, the hand of Gonzalez is present. Or is it his spirit? You gaze in amazement at the shape of the piping and the stylised concrete tables; you're mystified by the light – where does it come from? In the long corridor it's green, hardly what you'd want at home, but here it sweeps the visitor into the world of surrealism; you feel yourself observed and yet anonymous at the same time.

I feel like a games player even before I get near the first computer.

»There should be an atmosphere in the room that's not real or physical,« Gonzalez hopes. »The lighting arrangement means a lot in that respect. We can't have much light here because it gets reflected in the screens; it's as dark as possible, very black and grey. And you don't know how many people are sitting at the computers in the dark. When you come up against the wall with the green light you're almost blind. The atmosphere should convey the same feeling of tension that you got in the first *Alien* film, in the scene when they came in contact with the monster for the first time, when they discovered the cocoons. A cavern with blue light, a hint of mist across the whole room. Neon spreads like the light from computer screens and gives a feeling of smoke.«

Many films dealing with the future have a strong element of dystopia about them. Society collapses.

»Yes, the bottom falls out. I hope things will change but our society is at its limits today. There's so much happening that is extreme. Extreme violence, great natural disasters.«



GATE E
33-40
73-80
113-120









Reception, with counter in concrete and solid iron. Walls and ceiling in two shades of grey. A wall of zinc-coated metal mesh forms the background.
Previous spread: massive table in lacquered concrete serves to divide the space between the games modules and the rest of the locale, in this case the activity square.

Abelardo Gonzalez, Swedish interior architect of the year. **Next spread:** Coffee and snack automats concealed behind an orange cloth hanging from ceiling to floor. Here players can wait till a games module is free.

Can this be one reason why so many go in for this gaming world?

»It may be so, but I believe too that it provides a place for people to meet. Young people don't have so many places to get together. Computers have generated an entirely new culture. This is where they can be left alone. This is where they feel completely free.«

Despite the variations in size – from houses to basins – and a wild mixing of styles (we'll be visiting his home shortly) Gonzalez's thinking revolves around what is apparent at Gamer's Paradise: architecture as stage setting. He appreciates the element of abstraction in the theatre, the way things can be allowed to happen in parallel. Spaces created with light, illusory spaces, spaces as attraction. He grows quite lyrical. And looks as if he's going to die of boredom when he bemoans that local authorities these days all plan in purely functional style.

»In baroque towns there's a real sense of stage design, and during the renaissance the city was seen as theatre. Around the Place de Vosges at Marais in Paris they first built all the facades and then added the rooms behind. Numerous good architects have designed stage settings, Daniel Libeskind for instance. And there's one well known choreographer and director who's also an architect, Robert Wilson. He's a designer too. His *Woyzek* in Copenhagen was tremendous architecture; he's a great aesthete.«

You're professor in architecture at Lund University. When you're teaching the students, what is it you want them to learn from you?

»That what seems not to be possible is possible. There mustn't be any limits tying architecture down. Many people believe that it must be expensive if it's to be good; they say no to good industrial material because they want a house that looks like the neighbour's. They pay twice as much just to get something that is traditional and looks posh. It's got to look like Dallas. The big construction firms have the same ideals, and often it's a sort of expensive deception.«

And as for Gonzalez himself, he's rigged up a blank conference room against the ceiling of an 11-metre tall room at an advertising agency in Halmstad, he's created a workshop for Santa

Claus at Övertorneå in Sweden and designed a tempting villa in Malmö in corrugated plate and concrete. Does he have a dream project?

»It would be interesting to design a whole residential district and maintain high quality at reasonable price. Bo01 was an opportunity wasted; ugly passageways between the buildings, views blocked by yellow bricks. You have to see the town as a single volume!«

Abelardo Gonzalez lives in the same building as Swedish Radio, but round the corner. In the radio offices the journalists sit staring at their computers, just like the players at Gamer's Paradise, hoping that reality will reveal itself in the entrails of the machine and emerge as news, a scoop, a truth at the end of the tunnel. I take the lift up to Gonzalez's flat and arrive in a beautiful room in which time seems to be stored in the form of theatrical properties from different periods. It's like being backstage. I sit in the Empire style armchair with its leopard-skin pattern and see the architect's collected items from

»That what seems not to be possible is possible. Nothing should be tying architecture down«

innumerable performances. A staged life if you wish. Antique, patterned classics of design among the chairs and cigarette stubs. A rusty steel table with candlesticks in a crush. Modern lamps shining on the ceiling. Flourishing plants standing in pots. Irons from Poland in formation on the floor. Cuttings from pop magazines on the wall. Loudspeakers with feather plumes.

He loved the 80s in Malmö. That was the time, he says now, that launched him on his international commissions. People were more daring there than in London and Barcelona. Ideas were crazier. Nowadays the owners of restaurants believe that it's enough just to ring a pal and have him come round with a few second-hand bits of furniture. Catastrophe! They know nothing of design. Unprofessional, he mutters.

Among the amusing details in his own flat are the tubular arches that he's bought back from various restaurants he's furnished. They hang in

sawn off sections against the ceiling, like parts of some never-ready air-conditioning system. Some of them are from the Anita Ekberg suite at Hotell Tunneln, where there was once a bed with columns reminiscent of Fontana di Trevi.

»I did a Git Gay suite and an Anita Lindblom suite too. But all the newly-weds wanted the Ekberg suite!«

Gonzalez's is of course delighted that the *Forum* jury is so gung-ho over Gamer's Paradise, especially since it is an international constellation of experts. Many year's ago he was awarded a prize for Hotell Tunneln's foyer by *Architectural Review*. But when visitors from abroad came to study it the new owner had already torn out everything and replaced it with bronze and mock chandeliers. In 1978 when Gonzalez designed the hotel's nightclub, the Trocadero, he had a budget of 5000 crowns. Later he redid the entrance in the form of a tunnel; a much more ambitious project with lowered floor level and a wooden structure covered in sprayed concrete.

»Sprayed concrete looks like rock and ages well. What's more, it's permanent. When the hotel was bought by a firm the CEO rang me in fury. They wanted to tear it all down but couldn't. Take it away and the whole building collapses.«

So the tunnel into the unknown remains. Abelardo Gonzalez has concreted himself into the city's foundations. They should have used him of course for the wretched rail tunnel through Hallandsås in southern Sweden; it would have emerged somewhere quite unexpected.

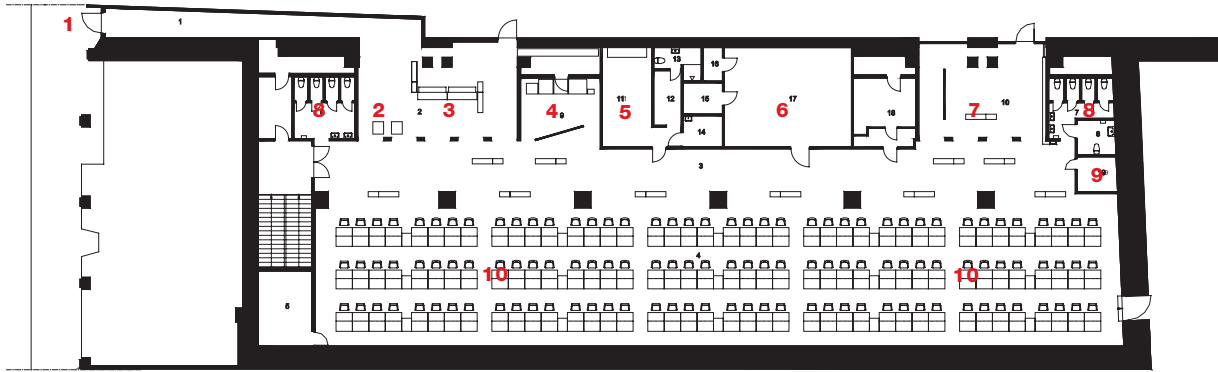
Lars Åberg is a freelance journalist and writer, based in Malmö. He never plays computer games but has visited all the more rock clubs. His latest book deals with Rosengård, a residential area of Malmö lacking in Abelardo Gonzalez's design. aberg.lars@home.se

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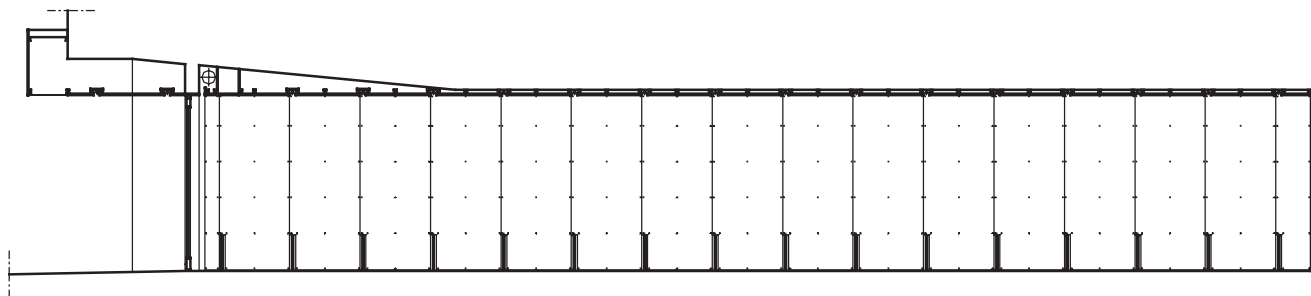




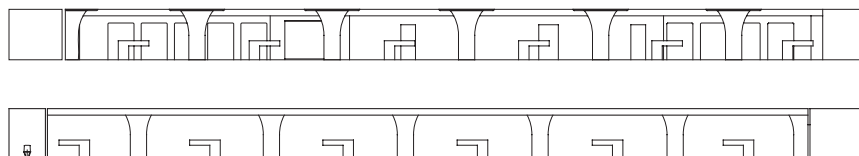
1. Main entrance
2. Logging in
3. Reception
4. Service square
5. Storage
6. Staff room
7. Activity square
8. WC
9. Server room
10. Computer modules



Entrance level.



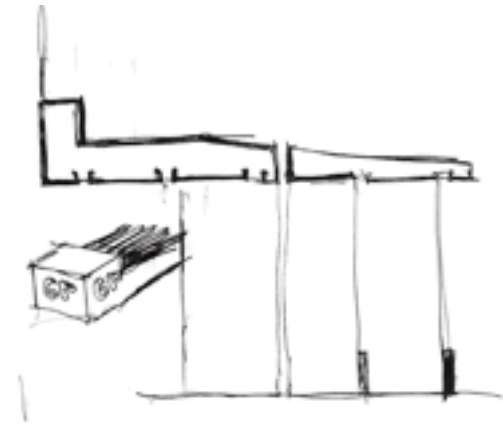
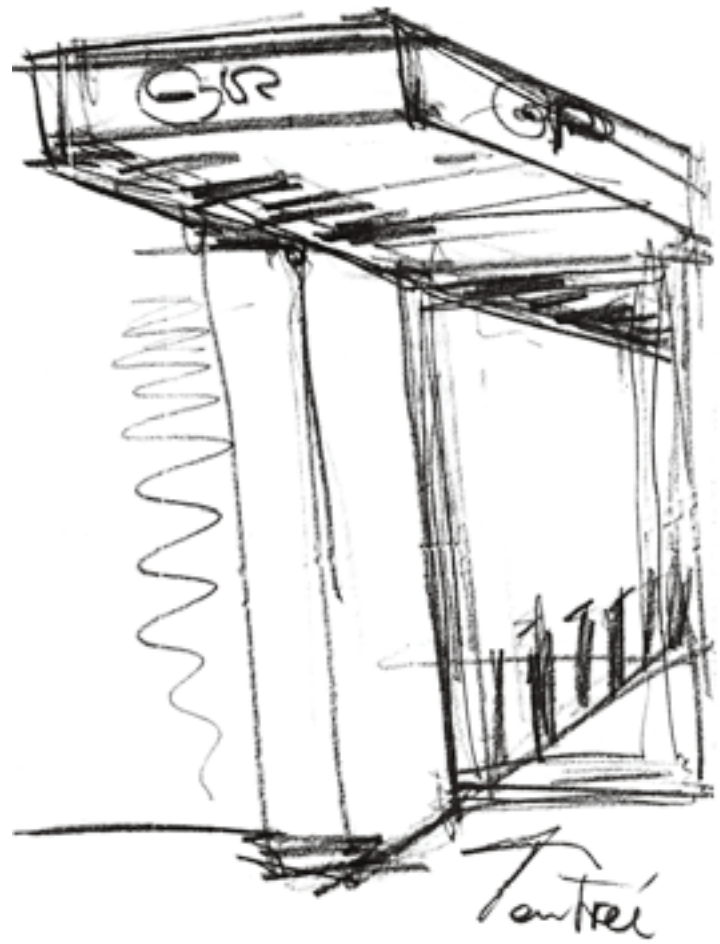
Entry tunnel with built in vertical lighting near the floor.



Section of the corridor showing siting of the concrete tables.

To avoid reflections in the screens the locale is lit mainly with blue neon strip lighting (*right*). The architect's designs for the reception counter and the entry tunnel (*below*). The rhythmically placed lighting exerts an accelerating attraction into the locale.

Next spread: in the reception area three stainless log-in automats welcome visitors, sited against a green gateway framing the gaming hall.







Extreme

Extreme

GP

GP



Gonzalez portfolio: showroom for Driade, Stockholm (2001); concept store for make-up chain Cellex C, Malmö (1999); Agency 1&2, Halmstad (2000); amusement complex at Santa Claus's workshop at Övertorneå (proposal). **Opposite page:** Villa Singer, Malmö (2000); Villa Widiksson, Halmstad (1990); World Hockey Bar, Stockholm (2000); the night-club Tunneln, Malmö (1988); restaurant Grappa, Malmö (2003).



Åke Eison Lindman (Cellex C, World Hockey Bar); Leo Gullbring (Grappa); Fredrik Dahl (Singer); Björn Blixt (Tunneln)

