

INSTEAD OF running a footbridge between the two buildings, Zoltan Pali's proposal turns the whole building into a bridge over 4th Street

This is who should win in Calgary

One architect on the short list for the new National Music Centre soars above the rest

BY PAUL WELLS • One night in July, hundreds of Calgarians packed a downtown theatre to watch five architectural firms from Canada, the U.S. and France defend their plans for turning the King Edward Hotel, a decrepit old blues spot where Ralph Klein held down the bar for most of the 1980s, into the cornerstone of a \$100-million, 80,000-sq.-foot National Music Centre. A jury will announce the winner on Sept. 23. But the broader public has been invited to follow every step.

"The great thing about this contest's organizers is they made the contest so open and allowed the competitors to see one another's work, which is really unusual," Elizabeth Diller of the blue-chip New York City firm Diller Scofidio + Renfro said in an interview. "It was excruciating, because you come in and you're so focused on your project. The idea of getting a sense of your competitors is very destabilizing. But it made for a very interesting event."

The National Music Centre is ambitious in several ways. As the next step in the evolution of the city's Cantos Music Foundation, it will serve as a museum for an impressive collection of historical musical instruments, from clavichords to synthesizers, most of which visitors are actually encouraged to play. It will turn the King Eddy back into a thriving performance space. Beyond that, the King Eddy project is designed as the cornerstone for Calgary's East Village redevelopment. The city's government is betting big on its ability to turn the stately old district, gone badly to seed in recent decades, back into a showpiece. But to do that they have to get the King Eddy choice right. And to do that, the competition jury will have to be as

unorthodox in its final choice as Cantos has been throughout the process.

The short list includes one genuine "starchitect," Jean Nouvel. The Paris-based winner of the 2008 Pritzker Prize bet everything on one idea for the King Eddy site: a 2001-style slab rising high over the shell of the old blues bar, so video from outdoor concerts could be projected on the side of the building. It's iconic. And forgettable.

Two prominent American firms bring real ingenuity to their proposals. Diller Scofidio sought a coherent philosophy for tackling the King Eddy project's jumble of mandates as a museum, concert hall, school and more. "It wasn't just black or white. There was nothing pure about it," Elizabeth Diller says. "Which leads to complexities: you can't answer it in one fell swoop." She decided to make the musical instrument collection the focus. Her design is built around dozens of small display rooms showcased through an interior glass wall.

Where Diller lets the instruments shape the building, Portland architect Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture sees the building as an instrument. Cloepfil wants to store the Cantos collection in a cluster of white towers he calls "resonant vessels," and is working with a Portland new media firm to design an interactive atrium that would allow

visitors to "play" an entire building. It's a vague but tantalizing notion. Montreal's Saucier + Perotte, the only Canadian firm on the short list, came up with a design for a sturdy but undistinguished building.

But it's the most obscure name on the short list, SPF:a, that has made the most promising bid. SPF:a is a boutique Los Angeles firm run by Zoltan Pali, an unassuming young architect without a fraction of his competitors' reputation. But the passion he's brought to every step of the Calgary competition is obvious. Pali offers the most elegant solution to the King Eddy project's awkward geometry, which uses two sites on either side of 4th Street. Instead of running a footbridge between two buildings, Pali's whole building is a bridge. It's such an elegant solution that Pali's building looks quite plain from the outside. But inside, he runs a breathtaking angled atrium through the entire building, a "soundscape" that would bring all the building's sounds down to the entrance. "We wanted to get people excited and interested about what goes on in the inside, because that's where the show is," Pali said. "That's where things are happening."

The technical challenges of Pali's design are daunting, but the care he has brought to his solutions is obvious. In the least-known architect in this competition, the National Music Centre has the best chance of making a building Calgarians will notice and remember. **M**



BAD TASTE... 'SPIKED PACIFIER'

Baby-related charms have long been a way for moms to express their family-friendly philosophy. But now, the anti-baby set has its own calling card: a "spiked pacifier" pendant. Designed by British artist Trevor Brown, known for controversial paintings of babies and dolls in not-so-innocent poses, the 35-mm pendant is fashioned out of silver. With a series of spikes on the nipple, this pacifier is clearly not meant for kids.