

THE PICS D'OR: AWARDING HOSTILITY IN URBAN DESIGN

On November 18, 2024, FEANTSA attended the Pics d'Or awards, an initiative by Fondation Abbé Pierre spotlighting hostile architecture. The satirical event exposes anti-homeless measures, from spikes and segmented benches to anti-loitering laws, highlighting their cruelty and societal impact. While humour captures public attention, the campaign's goal is systemic change. By raising awareness, Fondation Abbé Pierre challenges cities to choose compassion over profit, emphasising the need to address poverty and homelessness with dignity.



By **Bryony Martin**, communications officer, FEANTSA

On the 18th of November 2024, FEANTSA attended the awards ceremony of the Pics d'Or. The initiative, founded by Fondation Abbé Pierre, shines a spotlight on the subtle art of excluding society's most vulnerable from public spaces. After all, who needs a social conscience when you can have spikes, uncomfortable benches, and discriminatory laws?

Since 2019, Fondation Abbé Pierre has been combining humour with horror for the Pics d'Or, an extension of their 2013 "Poverty is Not a Crime" campaign (ran alongside Emmaüs France and Emmaüs Solidarité), and 2017 soyonshumains.fr platform. The campaign is defined by its satirical approach to the issue; every year, submissions pour in from across France – and occasionally beyond – showcasing the very best in anti-homeless ingenuity. Spikes covering any inch of flat surface? A classic. Benches with unnecessary armrests? Fan favourites. Flowerpots? A subtle, but effective approach.

The campaign is composed of three parts, a call for submissions, a multidisciplinary jury deliberation, and the awards ceremony (however, submissions can always be made to contribute to the census). This year the ceremony consisted of a pedagogical session featuring Camille Gardesse, sociologist and urban planner; Sandrine Ruch, volunteer; Marion Ogier, a lawyer with la Ligue des droits de l'homme; and Christian Pagé, Author with experience of homelessness, discussing hostile architecture, its impact, and what can be done. This was followed by a satirical awards ceremony, with various comedians presenting the awards.

There are six categories within the competition:

1. "The Nail" (Le Clou): the public's choice award.
2. "No Shame" (Sang-scrupules): for the most brazen measure.
3. "The Impostor" (L'Imposteur): for the most contradictory measure.
4. "Out of Sight" (Ni vu ni connu): for the most insidious measure
5. "Move Along" (Bouge de là): for anti-precarity ordinances.
6. "Not Better Elsewhere" (C'est pas mieux ailleurs): the international prize.

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The jury evaluated submissions based on the clarity of their intent, their concrete impact, creativity severity, and sometimes sheer cruelty.

Hostile architecture, or as some city planners might call it, “effective space management”, is no new concept. Cities are designed, meaning there is always intent behind their construction - and not always the best ones. The phenomenon of social engineering aims to direct collective behaviours and dissuade ‘undesirable’ outcomes – like bridges designed just low enough to prevent public buses, and the predominantly lower-income families and BIPOC citizens they carried, from accessing a public beach (Kessler, 2021). The Pics d’Or prize winners are standing on the shoulders of giants of discrimination.

Through the Pics d’Or, Fondation Abbé Pierre highlights the violent nature of these measures, which strip individuals of basic rights such as rest and dignity. Rather than addressing homelessness, cities choose to sweep it under the rug in the name of public aesthetics – and often profit. When asked about the event, Noria Derdek, Fondation Abbé’s head of legal studies, emphasised that:

‘People experiencing homelessness are not to blame for the lack of quality shelter spaces or for not always being able to access them in a manner that respects their needs – especially when accompanied by pets. Nor are they responsible for the discrimination they face in accessing housing, even social housing.’

And yet, anti-homelessness and anti-poverty mechanisms would have you believe otherwise. People are punished for having nowhere else to go, by the very people and organisations who have the responsibility, and power, to help. From anti-loitering laws to strategically placed obstacles, these measures are a masterclass in saying: “We see you... and we really wish we couldn’t.”

The Pics d’Or presents an opportunity to denounce this mentality. While the ceremony is entertaining, its ultimate aim is real change – both in public opinion and in the physical makeup of our cities. It has a history of success; after the first edition, a bank in Paris removed the spikes outside its building. However, we should not be overly optimistic – hostile urban measures are nothing if not persistent.

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Awareness raising can be the first step to combatting hostile architecture. The Pics d'Or challenges cities to choose community or commerce, compassion or cruelty. Turning the spotlight on anti-homeless measures forces us to ask uncomfortable questions about the kind of cities we want to build. Visual storytelling and satire play a pivotal role in the campaign's success. Humour captures public interest, hopefully turning outrage into action. Having a photographic archive of hostile architecture can help train us to recognise even the most inconspicuous instantiations.

As Christophe Robert, Director General of Fondation Abbé Pierre stated at the event:

'By organising the Pics d'Or awards, the foundation seeks to raise awareness about this phenomenon, which pushes people ever further away from city centres while rendering them invisible. It challenges this denial of the right to the city and the right to a hospitable urban environment. Through this initiative, we want to remind everyone not to mistake the real fight, which is to end poverty and homelessness.'

You can access the maps of anti-homelessness architecture [here](#).

Have you witnessed some ingenuity lately?

You can report them to picsdor@fap.fr to contribute to the census.

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