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Anatomy of a Jury

A well deserved mythology surrounds design awards. More than anything else today, awards are the measure of goodness and success in environmental design. They are coveted by professionals and academics alike as hallmarks of great firms as well as bestowers of tenure and promotion for faculty. Their importance is equal or greater to having projects published and reviewed in architectural magazines and even the national press. Yet the EDRA/*Places* Awards for Place Design and Place Research set out to be different. Its concern is the design of good places with an eye toward capturing public as well as professional interest.

But what really happens in a design jury, especially one with such a broad mission? Having served on several professional design juries, I have learned that they are simply hard work. It was with a great sense of anticipation and relief that I approached the EDRA/*Places* awards jury, which convened for almost twelve hours on December 13, 1997, in Lawrence Halprin's South of Market warehouse offices in San Francisco. My role this day was simply one as listener and helper along with *Places* executive editor Todd W. Bressi, assistant editor Robert A. Gonzalez and EDRA board member Nana Kirk. The four of us were afforded a unique opportunity to observe a lively discussion by some of the most important environmental designers and researchers of our time. The discussion, as we would quickly discover, would not only examine the projects submitted but the entire state of environmental design today.

Genesis

At an Environmental Design Research Association Board meeting some years ago, fellow board member Roberta Feldman (of the University of Illinois, Chicago) and I mourned the then recent passing of the *Progressive Architecture* research awards. The magazine had discontinued its awards shortly before its sale to Billboard Publications in December, 1995, leaving no clear alternative for recognizing the very best design research. At a break in the EDRA board meeting in San Antonio, Roberta and I agreed that this was a serious loss for those of us that did research-based design or environmental design research and something needed to be done.

The first step was a letter from then-EDRA chair Roberta to the editor of *Architecture* (who had acquired *PA* in the then-historic corporate take over) encouraging them to continue the awards (which it has since done with a more limited focus on building technology). After a firm no-thank-you from *Architecture,* we decided to take on the effort ourselves. EDRA as an organization has a long history of awarding the best efforts of its members in the form of annual career, achievement and service awards (of which jury member Clare Cooper Marcus is one winner), so we knew that this program needed to be both unique and rigorous.

In late 1996, I approached *Places* editors Donlyn Lyndon, Randy Hester and Bressi about the notion of collaborating on a joint awards program. I found an immediate willingness to join forces with EDRA managing the program and *Places* publishing the results. This partnership seemed natural as both the journal and EDRA shared a common commitment to making better places and each offered a complementary perspective and avenue to the other.

Together we wanted to break out of the typical pattern of giving awards and publishing results, but to use this opportunity to highlight how research advances were being translated into the design of places. Far more progress had been made in research-based design than most practitioners and even the public realize, and we thought this could be a way to cast new light on the value of research in design.

We jointly proposed and received funding from the Graham Foundation to launch an exploratory two years of the program. The large number of diverse entries received from around the world and the gathering of this distinguished group on a cold day in San Francisco became the fulfillment of this dream.

Not only did the jury day provide insight into the workings (and limitations) of design juries, it helped clarify for me the state of environmental design research today. Many issues would raise themselves in the submissions and jury deliberations in the course of the day that speak to the difficulty of trying to identify exemplary environmental design projects and research. What makes a good place? How can one tell that a place in fact works (beyond the "let's look at the slides" pitfall of most professional awards juries)? What gives a project the potential to inform and make better places? How can you tell that the project was informed by research or can inform the design of future places?

Deliberations

Places and EDRA staff had in advance carefully catalogued and sorted the submissions into categories and subcategorizes. First, all submissions had been divided between place design and place research. They were then subdivided by project type including gardens, outdoor spaces, streets, master plans, public buildings, residential design (for the design submissions) and publications, exhibitions, teaching studio projects, building types and urban design (for the research entries). Binders covered every surface in Halprin's large studio.

We were all somewhat overwhelmed by the task at hand. Not only were there large-scale, big-budget built projects but more modest experimental neighborhood or site scale projects, and theoretical and studio proposals. Work not only covered a wide range of scales and types but were from all over the country as well as Canada, Mexico, Spain, Denmark, France, Italy and Pakistan. I remember my first impression as being one of satisfaction with the richness and range of environmental design laid out around us.

I found the reading stage to be one of the most critical to the entire jury process. Here the first line projects become identified. If the writing is not strong and the arguments not compelling, a project tends to get set aside. Many good projects might be passed over because they do not make a convincing case in the limited time a juror could pay attention to each entry — not because of their lack of quality. This was no doubt the case as jury members wadded through the large number of submissions.

Story telling

As such as anything, a jury gathering is about story telling. Over lunch, jury members broke into many personal and professional stories. I was struck by how well every one knew each other confirming how small the world of environmental design really is. For example, Halprin and Lyndon had collaborated on the design of Sea Ranch, Lyndon and Cooper Marcus were faculty colleagues at Berkeley, Lyndon and Hack were at one time colleagues at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Lyndon and Samina Quraeshi had collaborated on the Mayor's Institute for City Design when she was director of the Design Program at the National Endowment for the Arts. While not everyone knew each other, by the end of the day, points of view were well established and new friendships established.

The day was a continuous stream of stories — Lyndon discussing logistics for an upcoming symposium at Berkeley featuring Giancarlo di Carlo; Quraeshi

Jurors meet to discuss finalists.

facing page: **Gary Hack, Lawrence Halprin, Clare Cooper Marcus, Samina Quraeshi, Donlyn Lyndon.**

facing page, far left: **Mark Francis, Halprin, Quraeshi.**

above: **Halprin, Quraeshi, Lyndon.**

Photos: **Nana Kirk**

above: **Francis, Halprin, Todd W. Bressi.**

facing page: **Hack, Halprin, Quraeshi, Lyndon.**

Photos: **Nana Kirk**

trying out stories she planned to use as the invited commencement speaker at Berkeley in May, 1998; Halprin candidly recalling his interactions with presidents and first ladies; Hack reporting on a trip to the Philippines and innovative efforts he found to return a U.S. military base to local control; and Cooper Marcus recalling her visit to the Oprah Winfrey show to discuss her wonderful book, *House as a Mirror of Self.* This familiarly was helpful throughout the day as many of the projects were known already to one or more jury members (so much of the myth of confidentially of design awards). The informal exchange afforded by an intense day together may explain in part why professionals almost always jump to invitations to serve on juries, even with little reward and guaranteed hard work.

Discussing

The program organizers had set a limit of three awards in each category beforehand, which set the limitations of the final choices. During the morning reading session, each proposal was read by two jurors and given a score from one to five. Early on the jury agreed that every project receiving a four or five would receive full jury discussion. This would allow projects favored by one jury member not to loose out in a first round averaging of scores.

After scores were tallied, the jury retired into Halprin's conference room where some fifty submissions were to be reviewed and discussed. Slides were put into trays and binders passed around. This began as a free-wheeling discussion with much frank and honest dialogue about the merits and weaknesses of each project. It became clear at this stage that the jury was not only looking for the very best projects but also work that could inform and inspire others to do research based place design. This was a search for projects and principles that could travel and be extended beyond themselves.

Deciding

Sorting out the winners for me was the most interesting and unpredictable of the entire process. The fifty projects were fairly quickly reduced to thirteen and then the hard debate began. After doing this myself several times on juries and watching this experienced group struggle with making hard choices, I am convinced that juries are essentially a negotiated process. Here were some of the great masters of design negotiation in action and it was a joy to observe. If a jurist could not make a compelling argument for a project, it was passed over.

Six Winners

From my own review of submissions early in the morning there were few surprises. The strongest submissions quickly rose to the top and became the focus of intense discussion. Weaker projects (or weaker submissions) were set aside in favor of three winners in design and three in research. Altogether, these six covered a wide range of places from the park to the city to the region. Research winners included a longitudinal study of public space use, a ground breaking work on the relationship of environment, design and health and a grand plan for regional sustainability. Design winners included a well publicized rebirth of a great urban park, a transportation corridor of public art projects and an innovative ecological design of a park.

What was interesting to me was that higher-visibility or well-seasoned projects tended to be favored over more modest or experimental ones. Some of the winners had received previous design awards and most had been widely reported in the professional media. I found myself quietly wishing that more innovative and less publicized projects would have risen to the top.

The selection of high profile projects may be due to the fact that jurists had previous knowledge of these higher profile projects while more modest and unknown projects often raised more questions than answers. I think the key here is for entrants to fully present the impact and benefits of project with empirical evidence rather than broad statements such as "this project has been extremely successful."

Some Other Meritorious Projects

It was clear in the discussion that there were more projects worthy of merit and awards than could be agreed upon by all jury members. What distinguished projects that did not win but were clearly meritorious was some feature that made some jury members uncertain. Lack of time to return to an entry to examine the issue in more depth meant it was simply set aside.

It was interesting to me that there were at least ten projects that received detailed discussion and the jury felt were worthy of publication, some of which are featured elsewhere in this issue. These included a studio based planning project in Pakistan, the Tanglewood Performing Arts Center in Massachusetts and an elegant passive solar chapel in Houston. Other meritorious projects singled out by the jury included sensitive user-based studies of elderly housing and a psychiatric hospital, research and design standards for U. S. Post offices, an ambitious subway public arts program and a co-housing project in Berkeley.

There were many submissions that did not receive any jury interest. Most of these simply did not answer the questions posed in the original call for submissions. Many were not able to show a link between research and design action. Most did not include any evaluation about the impact of the project other than photographs and lengthy narratives. Others were simply lacking in innovation or vision.

The State of Design Research

Reflecting back on the entries and the hard work of the jury, I wonder what our process may say about the place of environmental design research. While a large and mature body of research exists today, I was struck by how little of design today is still informed by research. As architects, planners and landscape architects search for more defensible processes, too little research still influences these efforts. Even here with some of the very best environmental design projects before us, many were not successful in making the relationship of research to design clear. While many principles or methods of good research, such as behavioral principles, participation, expression of meaning, etc., could be gleaned from the projects, few of the submissions documented this well.

The jury deliberations and quality of submissions reminded me of sociologist and award winner John Zeisel's seminal book, *Inquiry by Design* (Cambridge University Press, 1984). Here Zeisel argues that research, to be successful, must be integrated fully into the designer's creative process. He suggests that when designers make research part of their everyday work, then projects take on a deeper meaning and significance. The fact that research was more implicit than explicit in most submissions is a partial fulfillment of Zeisel's call for the merging of research and design.

Many of the projects also did not fully acknowledge what made the designed place successful. Even in the winning project, Bryant Park, for example, I saw no reference to the early work of Wally Wentworth and Anita Nager, environmental psychology doctoral students at the City University of New York Graduate Center. Well before William H. Whyte, they had studied the park and its problems and recommended removing the walls and barriers around the park to make it better connected to the street – the one design act that made the revitalized park such a public space success story (this same principle is now being used by landscape architect Michael Fotheringham in his recently selected redesign of San Francisco's Union Square).

Some Future Thoughts

In future years, I would like to see the EDRA/*Places* awards program focus more on what makes good places – the core mission of both *Places* and EDRA. There could be more clarity about what is wanted in entries in this regard. We could be more specific about the qualities that make good places and the processes and form that makes them so. One only needs to read a recent EDRA conference proceedings or an issue of *Places* to get a good glimpse of some of these. One of the problems with award juries is they tend to focus on one person, firm or agency, while good places are the product of complex and often messy process involving many people. This awards program must applaud not the single designer or client but the large array of people involved in the design of urban places today.

This awards program should seek out the very best of both research-informed design and research-inspiring design. We should also insist on more evidence that places in fact work as they are claimed to. One way to do this might be to ask submitters to provide an audit of success, such as testimonials from users and clients. Another would be to develop a two-stage process in which finalists are identified and required to submit additional material addressing concerns of the jury (although I doubt we have the energy and resources to do this). The jury of the Rudy Bruner Award for Excellence in the Urban Environment, initiated and run by EDRA members, actually visit sites before bestowing awards. I think adding a public member to the jury would add a sense of reality to the process (Charleston, S.C., Mayor Joseph P. Riley, Jr., had been invited to join the jury, but he had to withdraw due to schedule conflicts).

It is too early to tell whether this joint awards program can sustain itself over time. I think all of us are convinced that there is still a need to applaud the very best of place design and research beyond the narrow venues of journal articles and traditional professional awards. I do see the EDRA/*Places* Awards as an important evolution toward developing a deeper culture of criticism and self reflection in environmental design. This first effort was a big step in this direction but clearly more can be done.

Turning to leave after an exhausting day, I paused to look at some of the hundreds of Polaroid photos covering one entire wall of Halprin's office. Looking at one photo of friends gathered for Larry's eightieth birthday party at his Sea Ranch house, I suddenly realized that environmental design is simply about improving the interaction between people and the environment. Thinking about the extraordinary work we had seen and discussed, I felt heartened that environmental design is, in fact, advancing this essential, life-enhancing activity.