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Author

Moudon, Anne Vernez

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Unconvincing Places

Anne Vernez Moudon

The concept of place is rich and complex, extremely difficult to define in a few words. Indeed it has been the subject of many books, articles, works of art, etc. In architecture and the environmental design arts, place has become a subject of scholarship relatively recently — over the past thirty years researched from such different perspectives as Donald Appleyard's, Christian Norberg-Schultz's and Dolores Hayden's.

Yet in spite of its complexity and the related difficulty to articulate its dimensions, place is an entity or an attribute that is easily recognized. It was relatively easy for the jury to select the winners. Naturally, views diverged and arguments ensued during the selection process, but over the course of the day, discussions quickly turned into decisions, with most awards made on a unanimous basis.

Reflecting on the jury process, we were surprised to see only a few of the architectural projects survive the final cuts. To the jury's dismay, many worthy projects — innovative office buildings, old people's homes, educational facilities, etc. — ended up on the out table.

I believe the reason why these projects failed to rally the interest of the jury lies in the way in which they were presented. The overwhelming use of standard presentations devised for architectural and real estate audiences failed to sway the jury because they failed to capture the sense of place and the complexity of purposes and qualities embedded in the projects. Photographs of shiny buildings, only a few of which showed humans (posing in selected spots), permanently blue skies or groomed trees and shrubs only bring the place qualities of a project to their lowest common denominator.

Projects were first reviewed by the jury based on written abstracts as a required element of all submissions. Because these abstracts were composed specifically for the Places Award Program, they addressed, albeit succinctly, the projects quality of place. In the few words submitted, it became clear to the jury that many of the projects had come out of rich approaches to design and building: they involved professionals as well as users, working in consort to achieve complex objec-

tives, including high levels of sustainability, multiple organizational structures, respect for people as well as for setting, a diversity of needs, adjustments to tight budgets, adaptation to difficult sites, etc.

The abstracts indeed kept most of the architectural projects in the pool of potential awards. However, in the second step of the process, which involved reviewing the background documentation that was submitted, the jury encountered mostly public relations brochures and glossies typically used in architectural magazines. No matter how much the jury deliberated the place quality of the projects hinted on in the abstracts, it could not find the evidence necessary to prove that these qualities actually existed — that, for example, the project did indeed fit and add to a historical context, that the place created was indeed cherished by the local population, that the project helped people in their everyday work.

In the end, it became clear that the same documentation or presentation that will convince a banker to make a loan or the same documentation that will win an architectural prize just cannot persuade a jury interested in place. Short of visiting the project sites and spending time there, our jury remained too uncertain about the uniqueness of many projects to make awards.

In contrast, the winning entries transmitted well the projects' complexities. They showed aspects of the process that led to the final product. They documented (some exhaustively) how the places were assumed by people and how they became part of everyday life. They showed harmony between this everyday life and both the natural setting and the previously built context. The presentations suggested feelings and states of being which could be easily grasped by the jury — in spite of its obvious, and necessary remoteness.

Future places design and research will continue to depend on entries which can convince of the place qualities of projects submitted. A special effort must be made by those submitting their work to document convincingly the special qualities of the places they have produced. This is not so much hard work, as it is deep thinking about ways to communicate the complex, diverse, multiple qualities of a project.