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In My Rear-View Mirror

Susan S. Szenasy

Competitions, if done right, can increase the value of design for society, inspire designers to do better work, and mark milestones in design history. For me, as a frequent juror, the EDRA/*Places* competition hit all these marks, making it a standout among its peers. Why would this be so? Shouldn't all design competitions strive to make the world, the profession, the human condition better? After all, designers have a long history of social conscience, and the generation coming up is showing a deep commitment to the environment and all its creatures, including the humans they design for.

Old habits have a way of lingering longer than they should. So the beauty-contest version of design competitions—fitting for a world of starchitects' formal pyrotechnics and general visual stimulation—is still going strong. But because the EDRA/*Places* competition represents the new way (interestingly, it's been advocating this new way for four decades) it's worth pondering the most recent picks in that light.

The Ballard Library and Neighborhood Service Center in Seattle, for instance, is designed to welcome everyone in the community. It offers natural light, warm colors, calm views, a planted roof, and comfortable conditions for reading and computer use. With its love of nature and respect for local materials, it also looks and feels as if it belonged to the Puget Sound region.

Why should this common-sense approach to building be seen as revolutionary? For the answer, just look around as you travel the world; you see the same sealed glass high-rise box in every climate, on every terrain, serving wildly different peoples whose cultural distinctions have nearly been wiped away. The Ballard Library and Neighborhood Service Center, on the other hand, reveals to patrons their place in the world. Its sensitive modernism connects them to changing qualities of sunlight and local breezes; the hardy regional flora growing on its roof survives without heroic attempts to keep it alive. Surely, the residents of this up-and-coming Seattle neighborhood feel that they've been given something extraordinary, something that belongs only to them, something that expresses who they are. And so, by anyone's reckoning, this building's design creates social value—as well as earning its architects the respect of the community.

The other winning projects in this cycle of the awards also had the rigor and beauty to inspire design professionals to do better work. So did entries like the research/exhibition of activities at the Bluegrass Stockyard, in Lexington, Kentucky, which stayed on the table until the last vote was taken, and just missed receiving an award.

Among the research winners, the Historic Greystone Initiative is exceptional in that it seeks to empower a working-class neighborhood. It is trying to bring historic preservation, long the domain of blue-haired ladies and the elite, to a place where real people live—to help residents of an inner-city Chicago neighborhood understand the value and beauty of the buildings they inhabit. As my fellow juror Jane Weinzapfel noted, the book—for this research was published as a handy paperback, accessible to anyone—is “empowering. It's a metaphor for transformation.” Perhaps it can even inspire other decaying neighborhoods to see value in their historic buildings.

Clearly, the Greystone project—as this crop of winners does generally—marks an important moment in design history. All display awareness of the need for social and environmental sustainability; and they evince a new appreciation of nature, combined with a growing technical know-how. One can see this in the drive to reclaim neglected waterfronts (Don River, Olympic Sculpture Park) and in the importance of culturally sensitive planning for contested terrains (the Palestinian arc). Such work shows a new understanding of regional resources as well as the realities of geopolitics.

But the most enduring and future-shaping feature of the EDRA/*Places* competition may be its emphasis on research. Today, as the world deals with the calamities created by climate change, everyone involved with the built environment is looking for new information. The need for research and analysis in natural systems, materials, processes, and technology is evident and urgent. And as we work forward, each project we undertake is an opportunity for a breakthrough, no matter how small or large.

Finally, while scientific, cultural, and social research is essential to this newly nuanced understanding of buildings and places, it must be mentioned that design research—now in its infancy—also needs advocates and skilled practitioners. This is where “Landscape Totems” presents a new paradigm. Its poetic, visual, haunting presentation of human traces on various landscapes, uses the ability of designers to present complex information in thought-provoking ways.

My fellow jury member, Fritz Steiner, measured its impact best: “Working with architects, landscape architects, and designers [I hear them say] ‘I can't do research.’ And research has been sort of pigeon-holed. It's either social science or...techy.... What this [project] shows is an original approach to research that grows out of creativity, out of a designer's approach.”

Imagine, poetry evoked by humans in a landscape!