

## DESIGN PERSPECTIVES

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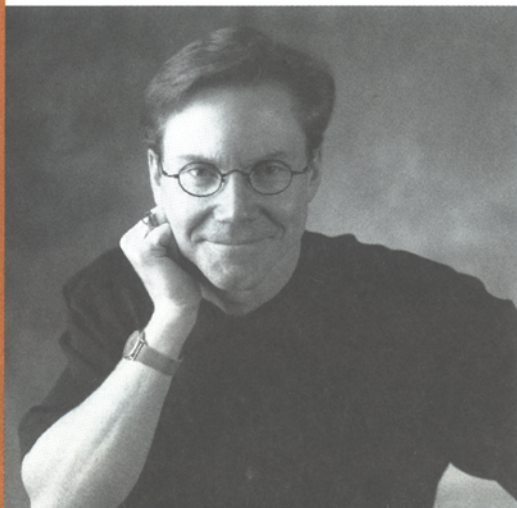
### WHY WE NEED DESIGN AWARDS

BRIAN L. FREESE, AIA

Our local chapter of the American Institute of Architects hosted the Central States Region conference in Tulsa this past September 13th thru 15th. As with all AIA conventions, the highlight of the three days was the Friday evening gala and presentation of the Excellence in Design Awards. For this event, both the AIA Central States Region and AIA Oklahoma presented awards to selected design projects. Each AIA organization had its own jury of three prestigious architects from various parts of the nation. So, after a very nice early evening of cocktails and dinner in the elegant Philbrook Museum lobby gallery, about 150 architects – and a few infinitely patient spouses – retired to the adjacent auditorium for the big show.

After opening remarks from host Rich Fisher, General Manager of KWGS Radio in Tulsa, presentations of the selected projects were given by the jurors of each AIA organization. Only about 10 minutes into the presentation of the CSR awards given by an acclaimed Chicago architect did I feel that strange and familiar feeling I have had at virtually all architecture award presentations: confusion. Not that confusion is a bad thing – it's just a little unsettling. I felt confused because among the display of a number of projects clearly deserving special recognition were a few that, well, just did not look like award winners to me. Those two or three in question appeared extreme, visually jarring, impractical, impersonal, inhuman, and uncomfortable. In discussions with other architects after the event, I found I was not alone in my opinions. These discussions, by the way, always begin very tentatively. We architects initially made carefully into

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into the dark waters of peer criticism, until we establish that none of us harbor petty jealousies at not winning any awards. Then we let'r rip. Once fully primed, we used many of the same descriptions: "Too harsh, too severe, horrible space, no substance!"

This time though, it struck me that there may be, and perhaps for some time may have been, a fundamental disconnect between architect jurors of design awards and the broader audience of architects. Consequently, I found myself questioning the process and even the purpose of our Excellence in Design Awards programs. It is only with a little distance from our recent awards event that I have gained some perspective on the real purpose – and perhaps the limitations – of architecture design awards.

First of all, we should all bear in mind that any juror's selections of award-worthy projects are purely subjective. This is true of any judgment of any human effort, not just art or architecture. Here we have three renowned and very busy architects from various parts of the nation, each with their own very strong personal opinions, given the task of reviewing as many as 150 entries and delivering their consensus selections within a few hours, while keeping the total awards to around 15. We infer that the award winners are all indisputably the best of all submissions, but the selections are only the opinions of three hurried – albeit highly regarded – peers.

Second, progress is an endeavor which relies on innovation, and true innovation by its very definition means to introduce something new and different. New and different thoughts in any endeavor are often viewed with suspicion by an audience of peers and the larger general public,

and even dismissed as irrelevant until their merits are ultimately obvious. It is no different in the profession of architecture. Architecture design awards will not be given to projects that are the most comfortable, unchallenging, or pretty in a conventional way. Architecture design awards are mostly given to those projects that exhibit truly fresh, even radical, solutions to project types from the difficult to the mundane. These are the projects that forge a new path, either in construction technologies, function or aesthetics. The difference between architecture and mere buildings is that architecture is a physical snapshot of the social, cultural, technological, and even political attitudes and conditions of any given place and era. Therefore, design award winners should be the most audacious and forward thinking, which means they may initially appear severe and unsettling. To the extent they are the vanguard of our time, their effects will dilute down to the more mainstream and ultimately become the most "representative" new architecture of our culture and era.

It is not unlike the latest women's runway fashion in New York, Milan or Paris (hang with me here). Every year, TV viewing people worldwide are shown news clips of beautiful and nearly anorexic young things prancing fearlessly down a ribbon of boardwalk, wearing heron nests or a scale model of the solar system on their heads and alternating strips of lit neon and gauze covering only the bare essentials. Very few wives in the viewing audience turn to their husband and say, "Honey, if you loved me, you'd buy me that." As utterly impractical as some of these women's haute couture fashions might appear, they do influence the broader fashion industry by encouraging

fresh creative solutions towards a new fashion of the time.

Those over the top runway events are also a venue for the celebration of creative thinking and risk taking, which in turn generates a buzz of discussion, excitement and action in the fashion industry. This brings me to my third point. Our galas, whether they are for national, regional or local levels, are all a celebration of the power and joy of creative thinking in our profession. And, the viewing of the latest and boldest designs sparks a renewed excitement and fresh discourse among us. We mainstream architects may not like all the award winning projects we see, but they make us talk, think, analyze our own projects, and perhaps summon the nerve to propose more innovative and forward-thinking solutions to our clients. And, that reinforces one of the most important responsibilities of an architect: to stretch the possibilities of the buildings and residences we design to their greatest potential. In order to live up to the basic client/public expectations with which we are tasked, we design professionals need to feed our creative engines with new ideas and new approaches from a variety of sources. We are all affected, and often energized, by exemplary work by other architects – from the wonderful to the weird – in an environment that celebrates the marvelous act of pure and fearless creativity.

So, to the Excellence In Design awards, I say "Bring it on!" Show me the most audacious, the vanguard, the cutting edge of architecture. Burst my comfort bubble, shake my cage. I am no longer confused. Next year, you will find me in the audience, wearing a birdcage on my head.