

Trade Signs

Another year, another round of awards. And another round of juror complaints: “Show us the context. Tell us the story.”

The truths of award programs are self-evident: awards recognize innovation and excellence; awards recognize the superficial and glib. Design firms spend a lot of money on award programs — photography, graphic design, staff time — because they believe the expense is justified. Awards bring more work.

But together, the award programs featured in this “Year in Review” offer clues to larger trends that are transforming the practice of architecture. The commodification of sustainability is only the most obvious, exemplified by the meme-of-the-moment: the brise-soleil — the exterior sunshading grille — a device abandoned by a past generation because of its annoying shadow patterns and propensity to collect grime and create maintenance headaches.

Perhaps the brise-soleil is on the ascendant because of what architect George Terrien AIA calls “the trap of the architect — the need to create visual identity.” Terrien’s own house — an elegant melding of green methods and technologies with the restoration of a Victorian house — was featured in the March/April issue of *ArchitectureBoston* and more recently in *The Boston Globe Magazine*. The experience confronted him with the realities of architectural marketing and editorial decision-making: you need pictures. Absent a close-up of the controls on his geothermal system, no one would guess that this “typical” white Victorian on a side street in Rockland, Maine, is anything but typical or that it represents a sophisticated rethinking of sustainable strategies. A brise-soleil — ridiculous as that would have been — would have given Terrien the modern-day equivalent of a trade sign. Just as a carved-wood boot once told illiterate customers the location of a cobbler’s shop, a brise-soleil or a bamboo floor announces the presence of a green designer. More significant green choices — the decision to build a smaller house, to forego air-conditioning, to walk to work or school — unfortunately have no corresponding visual identity.

The need to create visual identity has undeniable influence on the evolution of the architectural profession. Aided by technology, designers proffer images that increasingly seem to fall into two extremes: graphically beautiful images that are so abstract and so confounding that even the most sophisticated jurors complain that they cannot understand them, and images that are so photorealistic that only close scrutiny reveals that they are indeed renderings. Technology conveys plausibility (a word that always conveys at least a hint of deception).

Reputations are often made and awards sometimes given on the basis of single images. This perhaps is the great lie of the multimedia age: whatever the apparent opportunities of multi-sensory, multi-dimensional presentations, the sheer volume of information available means that we typically default to a two-dimensional image as a way of identifying and remembering a building. Quick: think of Boston’s new Institute of Contemporary Art — the winner of the 2007 Harleston Parker Medal, and the subject of several essays in this issue. Most likely, you visualized a scene that you’ve probably never actually witnessed — the dramatic view from the water (or perhaps Pier 4) looking back toward the great cantilever. That this view has little relationship to most people’s experience of the building does not deny its importance, both as a trade sign of sorts for the ICA itself and as a likely inspiration for other future buildings.

The trap of visual identity is particularly vicious because it feeds our appetite for fashion. The brise-soleil, applied to the north wall of a strip mall, becomes mere decoration. But, as in the case of the Terrien house, our lazy dependence on visual clues can blind us to real innovation. Within the following pages are other clues to other forms of innovation. Phil Bernstein FAIA, in his essay “Now What?,” outlines coming changes in the practice of architecture. Nader Tehrani describes a radically different challenge to the competitors for the 2007 Rotch Travelling Scholarship. And featured among the many familiar award programs is the first Building Enclosure Design Award.

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Together, these clues hint at another kind of transformation — of a discipline that is beginning to reinvent itself from within, that is re-examining fundamental aspects of building in ways that suggest that lasting change in the design and practice of architecture lies just ahead.

In another year, there will be another round of awards and another round of juror complaints. Representing what will no doubt be many exceptional, excellent buildings, more “signature” (a/k/a “iconic”) images will fill our pages. Once again, in recognition of their contribution to the award process, *ArchitectureBoston* will run photographers’ names with the project credits. But even these talented individuals understand that real innovation is sometimes invisible. ■

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