

UNBUILT ARCHITECTURE AWARDS/2004

Jury Comments

The 2004 Unbuilt Architecture Awards program attracted 125 entries from an international field of designers. The review panel designated six projects for awards with a secondary tier of projects that merit special attention.

There is a pattern in the submissions over the past few years that was especially evident in 2004. Designers are preoccupied with building skins and landscape ideas, with a distressing lack of interest in architectural space or imaginative programs – a disturbing imbalance that suggests increasingly superficial design responses that do little to serve the people and places for which they are intended. We also noted a striking dearth of strong house designs and found that most of the residential submissions ignored both their landscape context and the opportunity for spatial invention within the building envelope. On a more welcome note, we were happy to see that large corporate firms are pursuing surprisingly innovative approaches to design and design research.

This year's awards recognize six skillfully imagined places that we would be delighted to encounter in a Brooklyn back yard, in a Providence parking lot, beneath the Ben Franklin Bridge, along the Lowell Connector in Boston, at a discarded New England reservoir site, and sparkling on the New York City skyline.

Jurors

Henry Moss AIA, Jury Chair (Bruner/Cott & Associates)
Michael Blier ASLA (Landworks Studio)
David Handlin AIA (Handlin, Garraghan, Zachos and Associates)
Nancy Levinson (*Architectural Record*)
Tim Love AIA (Utile Inc.)
Janet Marie Smith (Boston Red Sox)
Maryann Thompson AIA (Maryann Thompson Architects)

HONOR AWARDS FOR UNBUILT ARCHITECTURE

Park Slope Mikvah

designed by Jason King, Mandi Lew, and John Coburn (Brooklyn)

This is a well-resolved small project that creates a compressed, processional architecture for orthodox Jewish ritual bathing that usually happens without a memorable setting but once took place in deserts. The mikvah is built on a residential site on the footprint of a 19th-century brick carriage house. The exterior walls reuse bricks, reweaving them to provide privacy screens that become harder to see through as successive layers of clothing are shed. The roof is a rain collector that funnels water to men's and women's mikvah vessels below. The little building is carefully layered for succeeding degrees of enclosure, warmth of materials, and sensuous contact with water, sun and moon.

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Staging Mt. Tabor's Renewal and Regeneration (Portland OR)

designed by StoSS Landscape Urbanism (landscape architect, Boston – project team members: Chris Reed, Marc Brossa, Chris Genter, Kazuyo Oda, Brandon Hartz, Michael Flynn, and Abby Feldman) with Taylor & Burns (architect, Boston), Arup (engineer, Cambridge MA), and Nevue Ngan Associates (landscape architect, Portland OR)

This is a regenerative design strategy for revitalization of a 150-acre urban park and decommissioned 19th-century reservoir complex that capitalizes on stormwater management to catalyze new ecological and recreational activities in an increasingly diverse succession of meadow and forest landscapes. The project's appeal lies in its rich integration of hydrologically informed terraces, basins, and embankments, wildlife habitat zones, and visually dramatic floating boardwalks and overlooks. The project designers visualized evolving landscape experiences rather than the typical outcome of standard land management practice that is likely to be both static and barren.

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Silresim Superfund Redevelopment Study (Lowell MA)

designed by StoSS Landscape Urbanism (planner/landscape architect, Boston – project team: Chris Reed, Aki Omi, Anri Linden, and Sarah Williams), Center for Technology and Environment, Harvard Design School (Niall Kirkwood), The Bioengineering Group (Salem MA), and TRC Environmental Corp. (environmental engineer, Windsor CT)

This is a practical and visionary 20-year Toxic Avenger scenario expressed through phased landscape and urban design initiatives at an existing industrial corridor and highly contaminated Superfund site. The sequence of landscape alterations that adjoining neighborhoods will experience starts long before any typical planning and remediation process would allow. The designers note that generic remediation approaches “amplify any sense of darkness or dereliction that has come to hang over a place, reinforcing the community's physical and psychological disconnect from the site and its potentially instructive histories. Obfuscation becomes the norm... people are kept out, the site is fenced off and buried under a clay cap.” This team's implementation

strategy sets out a succession of increasingly permanent and capital-intensive changes that evolve from public events calculated to heighten the public's participation in the site's recovery. Images associated with each stage in the recovery process help visualize how the site might be seen as it comes back to life.

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Parking Lot for Stormwater Collection and Containment (Providence RI)
designed by Joseph James (Belmont MA)

A potentially rich marriage between a performing arts center's transparent parking deck and a wetland habitat, this is the conversion of a half-acre of existing asphalt to an excavated urban bioswale under a parking surface of steel grate. A quincunx of poplar trees rises through slots in the grating to define parking spaces and travel paths. The designer's sketches immediately convey an imageable option for water and soil remediation in places that typically are eyesores, heat islands, and staging areas for sewer overflows.

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Community Center (Camden NJ)
designed by Matthew Henning Griffith (Fayetteville AR)

This architecture for this gritty urban site attempts to fill programmatic gaps at the city scale and create new social and spatial links across the dividing landfall of the Ben Franklin Bridge. A twisting single-story building traces the different alignments of an existing subway access tunnel and a shopping street to turn back and enclose a courtyard park. Simpler building volumes are set on top of this base while leaving it to resolve the sectional complications of the existing site and its infrastructure connections. Community classrooms, meeting spaces, library, auditorium, gallery spaces, and shops occupy various levels of construction. All public interior spaces can communicate through and across the protected courtyard. This award recognizes the resilient optimism in the designer's spatial parti that tackles a tough neighborhood and a pivotal, if unforgiving, site.

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Tower at 400 Fifth Avenue (New York City)
designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (New York City – project team: Peter Magill AIA, Gary Haney AIA, Stephen Apking AIA, Aybars Asci, Barbara Kalish AIA, and Nick Holt)

The massing of this 600-ft tower acknowledges its historic predecessors in this portion of the New York skyline, but the less contextual architecture of its surface is what shows the most imagination. The facades are unpredictable fields of offset planes that take full advantage of the reflective qualities of glass. The fascination with the building's skin produces an elegant and interesting outcome – sufficient to deserve an award in its own right – and the designers' search for an innovative relation between the building's perceived volume and its surface *adds* dimension to their achievement.