How do we apply the notion of taste to the built environment? How does culture influence what we find beautiful? This issue of ArchitectureBoston wades into the fray to examine what the eye of the beholder might reject—or revere.
Here is your charge: Select the most beautiful piece of architecture, monument, or structure built in Boston in the past decade. Not the most prominent, not the best—the most beautiful. Now, place your choice alongside those of nine other people whose criteria for beauty differ from your own, and decide, collaboratively, on a single winner. How can a democratic process, you might ask, arrive at consensus about a quality as ineffable as beauty?

Since 1921, under the auspices of the Boston Society of Architects/AIA, 10 jurors annually are asked to undertake just this task, to bestow on a single project the Harleston Parker Medal. The medal is Boston architecture’s highest honor, one that dares pose the question of what constitutes beauty in the built environment. I was given three opportunities to devise an answer, twice as a jury member and once as jury chair. Each of those years, despite the seeming impossibility of the assignment, the jury established a hard-fought, transitory definition of beauty.

A glance at the past near century of medal winners reveals that juries cannot help but channel the preoccupations of their historical moment. In the jury’s fifth year of deliberations, the winner was the Motor Mart in Park Square, the world’s largest garage at the time. With its smooth double-helix ramps and capacity for 2,000 cars, the Motor Mart was 1929’s model of the architectural sublime. Postwar European Modernism was the fashion in the 1950s, as evidenced by a string of spare, horizontally articulated winners such as Harvard’s Allston Burr Lecture Hall (1953...
We consider the importance of immediate, positive visceral reaction. We talk about the necessity for holistic quality; we argue about the import of civic responsibility in this context. (Must the medal go to a publicly accessible building?) We debate whether beauty equals “supermodel gorgeous” or something deeper. We attempt to approach our task with intellectual clarity but promise to remain open to the physiological signs of beauty. Does an architectural experience hit the stomach before it stimulates the mind? That response might signal beauty as well.

Jury members sit together for hours, stretched over multiple meetings, to look at and discuss images of 100-plus nominated projects. It is an arduous process of negotiation—punctuated by moments of strong aversion and impassioned advocacy—to cull a short list of finalists to visit in person over the course of a single day.

These site visits are critical to the success of the process on two accounts. First, they provide each juror the opportunity to assess the project’s success from a distinct disciplinary standpoint. Architects and builders judge craft. Urban designers and landscape architects evaluate contextuality. Governmental representatives gauge the project’s social impact. This is the technical-professional benefit of engaging the projects in person. But second, and arguably more important, the site visits test the haptic and, dare I say, spiritual resonance of each finalist. A photograph, no matter its fidelity to the subject, cannot replicate the inexpressible transcendence that an extraordinary space grants both body and mind.

In 2012, my final year on the jury, we narrowed our final field to an academic lab, a structured landscape, a synagogue, and an art museum. After a long day of site visits, we sat down

The jury was also not immune to the attraction of historically inflected Postmodernism in the 1970s and ’80s, seen most monumentally in the 1989 winner, the Hynes Convention Center.

But the Harleston Parker Medal represents more than just fleeting public taste. Almost all of our most treasured, if controversial, 20th-century structures are on this list: the three John Hancock buildings (1924, 1950, and 1983 winners); the Edward A. Hatch Memorial Shell (1941); Le Corbusier’s Carpenter Center (1964); Boston City Hall (1969); and Post Office Square Park (1992), to name a few. Somehow, the multistep process of nomination, visitation, and deliberation that Harleston Parker juries undertake each year results in the selection of built work that has a good chance of withstand ing the vagaries of taste and time.

At the annual introductory meeting, newly acquainted jury members grapple to define provisional criteria for beauty that will drive assessment of the nominees. This is always an uncomfortable conversation. The Harleston Parker jury is purposefully heterogeneous. In any given year, it is composed of experts from architecture, landscape, and urban design; municipal and federal government; arts management; engineering; contracting; journalism, or any number of other fields that engage the built environment. Each jury member inevitably sees the nominated projects through the lens of professional expertise. Asking each of them to expose their soft core—where beauty resides—is another matter altogether.

Nevertheless, this initial discussion teases out many commonly held criteria the jury repeatedly returns to in the review of nominees. We are reminded of the Vitruvian triad of Firmness, Commodity, and Delight. (One juror suggested that Delight was where the group should focus its energies.) We consider the importance of immediate, positive visceral reaction. We talk about the necessity for holistic quality; we argue about the import of civic responsibility in this context. (Must the medal go to a publicly accessible building?) We debate whether beauty equals “supermodel gorgeous” or something deeper.

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to discuss our experiences and to agree on a winner. Two hours into deliberations, the jury was deadlocked. Would we be forced to reconvene and start the conversation anew or simply walk away without awarding a medal? Five jurors must agree for a winner to be elected; periodically, a No Award year does come around. The conundrum, of course, was to decide which project was most beautiful, and the inherent subjectivity of such a choice once again took center stage. Finally, an Olympic-year analogy helped to break the deadlock: Was our collective choice akin to the high jump or the decathlon? (Kudos to James Arthur Jemison for this excellent, and funny, way of framing the problem.) In other words, could a building be judged most beautiful for a singular beautiful space that exceeded all other spaces that the jury experienced (sublimity, the highest single jump), or was holistic beauty the ultimate criteria (synthesis, as proven by the 10 events of the decathlon)? We agreed on holism, and the deadlock was broken.

We awarded the 2012 Harleston Parker Medal to the MIT Media Lab, designed by Maki and Associates with Leers Weinzapfel Associates. The Media Lab is a materially austere building, with a restrained palette of opaque white surfaces, transparent expanses, and strategic punches of bright color (most often to highlight vertical circulation). While the material asceticism and impeccable architectural detailing caused one juror to have to “stretch” her definition of beauty, its quietness—or severity, depending on one’s viewpoint—serves a distinct purpose: to allow the building to act as a fairly mute catalyst for its animated program. Based on early discussions about the importance of user pleasure as a criterion for beauty, we had decided to visit the projects at their most vibrant, with people and activities at full throttle. The Media Lab is a building that shines specifically in this context. It was custom-designed for the idiosyncratic, interdisciplinary, and interactive work style Media Lab innovators had developed over time in their previous space. It is a building that undeniably loves and is in turn enhanced by its occupants. The jurors agreed that the design supports collaboration on an innovative level and that its openness and spatial complexity allow users to take center stage. The building is beautiful in action: that is its strength. Only over time will we learn whether our selection of a spatially complex building that amplifies the activities within more than its own aesthetic virtuosity somehow captured the zeitgeist of the early-21st century.

Beauty is an architectural quality little discussed and even more rarely agreed on.