

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Award Winners —Outrageous Yet Appealing

It is hard enough to keep track of all the movements surfacing in art and fashion (they are not mutually exclusive) without worrying about the latest thing in architecture. Architecture? Since when is a building not a sober arrangement of walls, roof and shelter for a specific need or purpose? Since the invention of symbolism, style and status, or roughly the beginning of civilized time and the start of the quest for beauty, which survives revolution and cataclysm with beguiling durability. In architecture, art has seduced function for centuries.

Today, it is harder to sort out what's happening because everything moves so much faster than ever before and is infinitely more complex. Styles seem to change with the seasons, supported by ideas ranging from superficial to profound. In the arts, everyone talks a great deal. This explosion of esthetic theory has had a particular force in architecture.

But it is not nearly as easy for the public to plug into architecture as into the other arts. There is no listed and approved Saturday gallery route, no well-publicized social pecking order of museum openings, no "hot" tickets to hit performances. There is one place, however, where the score is being kept. Nothing stops the magazine *Progressive Architecture* from the completion of its annual task: the P/A awards that both herald and record the state of the art with amiable regularity. As John Morris Dixon points out in the introduction to the January awards issue, both the process and the results have turned into a kind of history summarizing changing taste, attitudes and principles of design.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the awards. They were given in three categories: architectural design, urban design and planning, and research. Some projects will be built and some will not; the record over the years is that many early winners are constructed realities today. A surprising number of the larger, urban studies will be executed, and some will have a considerable impact on planning practice.

But if the group of architectural design award winners indicates the state of the art today—and it is fair to say that they are generally on the cutting edge of esthetic exploration—then architecture is in a curious and troubling phase. It is clear that a great deal of talent and vitality exists, and it is indisputable that a great deal of thought is going into what is being done.

However, the results tend to be both outrageous and appealing—a paradox in itself. The arbitrary invention of complex and willful forms that create unnecessary problems, displayed in so many entries, is outrageous. At the same time, one cannot help but admire the skill with which these appalling and gratuitous problems are solved, and such legerdemain is appealing. It is a little like applauding the dubious achievements of a double-jointed acrobat. Designing for themselves or a willing client, these architects are standing on their heads in a stunning balancing act for a whole new set of esthetic gymnastics and sensations.

Obviously, there is an easier way to build, but no one seems to be interested. The kicks are here; any structure that does not tie its design solution to symbols, metaphors, signs and systems that serve as references to physical, emotional,
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intellectual and spatial response is beyond interest or respect. Unfortunately, even for the intelligent "consumer" of architecture, it is often beyond understanding. And even a juror who protests that a house need not have an "idea" beyond looking good and working well becomes suspect in this context. Anyone who finds the "idea" hard to penetrate, or scarcely worth the effort, feels either that he is a simpleton or has been short-changed. Only the young could work so hard to complicate life and art. It takes experience to strive for simplicity.

The premiated designs, then, are stimulating and disturbing in equal degrees. The first prize design, "Pink House," by Edward Mills, is an almost impenetrable jigsaw of abstract elements that might be called "Homage to Cubism and De Stijl through Meier and Graves." It elicited the curious comment from a sympathetic juror who obviously liked it that the design was poised perilously on the edge of disaster. There will be many who will think that it has dropped over. There are indeed enough intriguing oddities of space and plan for the most jaded appetite. One dismisses this work only at the risk of missing a strange and instructive combination of expanding and shrinking horizons.

What we are given this year, in fact, is an extremely mixed architectural bag. There are some subtle and genuinely thoughtful examples of newer trends by Michael Graves and Chimicoff/Peter-son. And there is an Aldo Rossi-inspired "gymnasium-bridge" by Steven Holl for the South Bronx, of a Styxian, surrealist gloom that is either the blackest kind of humor or an inspired anti-environmental event. Many of the entries were accompanied by long, "quasi-literary"

statements aimed at profundity and loaded with rhetoric.

When one turns to the urban design and planning projects there is clarity, toughness and a remarkable sense of a holistic environment in both its human and formal factors. These are the advances in concept and practice that the public will feel much more quickly than the house-as-art. And they are exciting proposals, too, such as the planning document for the first United States urban national park, by David A. Crane and Partners, Gelardin, Bruner, Cott, and Michael Sand and Assoc., an undertaking that would also revitalize the 19th-century mill buildings and canals of Lowell, Mass.

Out of 654 entries, almost one quarter were for private houses. Interestingly, this upsurge has come at a time when private-house construction is enormously expensive and has been pronounced sociologically irrelevant. But this traditional design frontier reflects the intensely personal esthetics of the younger generation. In many cases these would be nice houses to visit but you wouldn't want to live there unless you had a highly developed desire for spatial adventure or a determinedly mannerist sensibility. I have a personal theory that this kind of thing is inevitable, and even appropriate, and occasionally inspired, as a response to the soporific and depressant banality of today's building norm, which has so impoverished feelings, sensations and the environment.

At any rate, if you don't like it, wait. In 25 years we have been through Brutalism and Romanticism, waves of folded and fluted roofs, pierced grilles, precast patterns, shed roofs, mega-structures and allusions of history and high-tech. Architecture may be eternal but its face changes constantly. And youth, as they say, springs eternal and ready to change the world. ■