

'Social Significance' Qualms Overcome in Design Award: 'Social Significance' Qualms

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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Point of View

'Social Significance' Qualms Overcome in Design Award

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The First Design Award in this year's awards program of Progressive Architecture magazine—a competition that for the last 18 years has been a reliable indicator of which way the architectural winds are blowing—is a house.

That hardly sounds like a radical choice or statement. It sounds more like good news for househunters.

In these parlous times, however, the choice of a house is highly controversial and has little immediate application to the country's unhoused or poorly housed millions.

Six years ago the competition virtually swore off houses. The private house was not a “valid architectural problem,” the jurors declared; it had no “social significance” on the scale that housing must meet today. The next year, houses were still found

by the judges to be “embarrassing.”

“Socially,” said one juror, “it's difficult to care about them.”

This year's top winner is an excellent house, a kind of ecological architecture designed with skill and sophistication by Muchow Associates to blend into a mountain slope at Sun Valley.

This was the jury dialogue:

Ulrich Franzen: “It's a piece of spectacular architecture.”

John Kouwenhoven: “The house is awfully good.”

Edward L. Barnes: “We all like the house.”

Myron Goldsmith: “It bothers me to give it a First Award because of all the earth-shaking problems of modern times, of cities.”

Franzen: “What's the point of feeling guilty? By not awarding this the

First Award you're not going to help the city. The only way you can help the city is, when you have a city problem, try your darndest.”

Kouwenhoven: “Aren't we, by picking the Sun Valley house and throwing out all the urban planning things, saying that architects aren't sociologists?”

Franzen: “I think any architect that thinks he's a sociologist ought to be locked up.”

Kouwenhoven: “That is why I don't have any compunctions about having that house as the First Award.”

And that about sums up the state of architecture versus the state of society.

In addition to the first prize house, the four top awards went to two schools, a hospital and apartments—

all good architecture and acceptable sociology. The schools tap the extremes of large-scale, long-range design and the immediate imaginative uses of “found” spaces.

The Eastwick High School and George Pepper Middle School of Philadelphia, by Caudill, Rowlett, Scott and Bower and Fradley, is a 39-acre project for 5,000 students and staff using a “house-plan” scheme and common facilities. At the other end of the spectrum are the East Harlem Pre-School and the Block School in Brooklyn, by Hammel Green and Abrahamson, in which miniaturized, creative community learning environments are set into an abandoned supermarket and a synagogue.

The Madera Community Hospital, Madera, Cal., designed by Rex Whitaker Allen and Associates, drew the

jury comment that hospital architecture has vastly improved over previous years.

The Santa Ana Apartments, phase two, by Backen, Arrigoni and Ross, Inc., is a court-housing scheme with particular attention to density, circulation and private open space.

Of the second group of prizes, the citations, one was awarded to a “walk-on” community map. Several others went to what might be called “conservation” design. It was a big year for environment and ecology.

The community map was prepared by a coalition of local groups and professionals called Community Design Associates for the Hill District of Pittsburgh under the Model Cities program.

Its purpose was the involvement of the community with its planning, and

the development of a device for visual understanding of the planning process. The result is a lively and useful graphic tool in the exercise of social and environmental change. The neighbors came in and walked all over the map to decide what their neighborhood should be.

“Ecological” projects range from a greenbelt and swimming pool for a housing development, the Trailwood Path System for the Trailwood Subdivision in Houston, Tex., to a non-architectural scheme called “Take Me to the Mountain” designed as a program for the use of a 55-acre wooded retreat near Austin, Texas. This one does not have any buildings at all. Both are the work of Charles Tapley and Associate.

The first will give environmental

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pleasure to suburbanites. The second is for a group with fewer hangups for whom nature and a little servicing from L. L. Bean are enough. What the jurors admired was the attitude toward the enjoyment and inviolability of nature, which "development" almost invariably destroys. Guilt perhaps, since the architectural profession has done a lot to destroy it. But the scheme is sensitive to the basics of land use and the joys of natural beauty.

It did not faze the distinguished jury (those quoted in the dialogue plus Ezra Ehrenkrantz) to consider these things the proper province of architecture. It was indicative of a new consciousness pervading the profession and its attitudes and practice, as well as the jury deliberations.

The emphasis is on process, or what the problem really is and how it can, or should, be solved. Process is an even greater preoccupation today than the end product.

The Progressive Architecture awards program has always told a great deal about the state of architecture and the profession. It did not become seriously involved with the state of society until six or seven years ago.

It has attracted trendy, as well as trend-setting projects, like flies to sugar. (There was the "megastructure" year, the "dumb and ordinary" year, and this year, the 45-degree angle.)

The program carries an air of prophecy fulfilled, because the awards are usually given in the project stage, for real commissions for real clients that are about to be built. There are no drawing-board dreams. A clutch of P/A files is the handiest possible reference to the styles and shibboleths of a decade.

This year, for the first time, a second jury was set up for planning and urban design

entries. That is another barometer of the times. These entries were judged by Jerry Glowczewski, Robert Schofield and A. E. Bye.

An award and a citation were given to two schemes, one urban and one rural.

The award went to a proposal for inner city redevelopment by the Detroit City Plan Commission that emphasizes a pedestrian network tied to familiar and landmark structures. The cited plan, for an unspoiled part of Islip, L. I., by Rafael Villamil, would preserve the land in its natural state while providing residential development. Both are given high marks for environmental sensitivity.

This year's results seem to say not only that environment and ecology are in, but that monuments are still out. They were virtually declared out last year. (No statement has more power to enrage a large part of the architectural profession than this one. Like all

groups, it is neither monolithic nor unanimous.)

Among the architectural citations given, large or commercial buildings were noticeably absent. If the king-size commercial products were submitted, they were not chosen.

The one office building, a state office building for Salem, Ore., by William, Endicott, Greene, Bernhard and Associates, was less imperial than usual. An IBM-MIS computer center facility in Sterling Forest, N. Y., by Gunnar Birkerts and Associates, was also selected.

Other citations were given to a modest art center for a small city, Mansfield, Ohio, by Don M. Hisaka and Associates, and tennis and handball courts for the University of Oregon in Europe, by Unthank, Seder, Poticha.

One more house was cited, by John P. Grady, to be made out of catalogue components in Pleasant Valley, N. Y., and

one more hospital, the Sacred Heart General Hospital, Eugene, Ore., by Rex Whitaker Allen and Associates and Balzhiser Rhodes, Smith and Morgan, associated architects. Oregon will soon be the place to see.

Two major fields of expressed disappointment were industrialized housing and churches.

No churches were chosen. There was some confusion about what this meant, spiritually, but no confusion about the fact that the jurors disliked the fact that a lot of them looked like Howard Johnson motor lodges.

One modular housing system, by Wells, Koetter, was given a citation, but the general opinion was that architects were missing the boat with showy "all-purpose" technical displays that were more impressive as engineering feats than as homes. Unless you live at Sun Valley, salvation has not yet arrived.