ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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A New Twist To the Old Awards Game

If there's any field that loves awards more than journalism, it's architecture. Journalism awards are usually a simple, straightforward "good job"; architecture awards tend to be fraught with cosmic connotations. Every architecture jury comes up with a "Where are we going?" statement along with the prizes, and an arduous analysis of trends, philosophy, and the present and future state of the building art. "Good job" can signify the direct solution of a basic building problem or the broadest kind of concern about human and environmental impact. How the profession views its peers and its products is one way of reading the times.

This stock-taking and soul-searching has become standard in January and May. January brings the annual awards of Progressive Architecture magazine, now approaching their 25th year, which search out winners from the whole spectrum of American architectural practice. May has come to mean the Honor Awards of the American Institute of Architects, given out since 1949, in an ever-increasing range of categories. This year, something new has been added. The Design and Environment Projects, selected by a jury and editors of Design and Environment magazine, is a program with a significantly shifting focus that provokes and requires comment.

The awards phenomenon is particularly intriguing right now when everyone is looking for signs and portents and all-too-evasive answers about an appallingly imperfect world. Architects find themselves holding the responsibility for a far larger part of that world than they ever thought possible. And so they screen their work for significance, accolades and auguries. The Naked Building has taken its place with The Naked Ape.

For the moment, let us put aside all of those municipal, manufacturers', chamber of commerce, building suppliers' and assorted professional group award programs that produce predictable building "bests" with routine regularity. The first observation to be made about the Design and Environment citations is that there is nothing routine about them in any way. They have come a considerable distance from the practice of giving Joe Architect a prize for a stunning (and photogenic) building that a professional jury admires for assorted technical and esthetic reasons. They represent an offbeat, sometimes slightly forced, but always basically sound attempt to call attention to newly perceived and unconventional aspects of design—from environmental enrichment to activities programs for urban spaces—that are conspicuously neglected in traditional architectural approaches.

Make no mistake; this does not mean that the celebration of architecture as art is over. Every man-jack on architectural juries keeps a spot in his heart and his head for the building-as-work-of-art. This is a custom and an achievement almost as old as the history of man. A good architect, if he is honest about it, admires nothing

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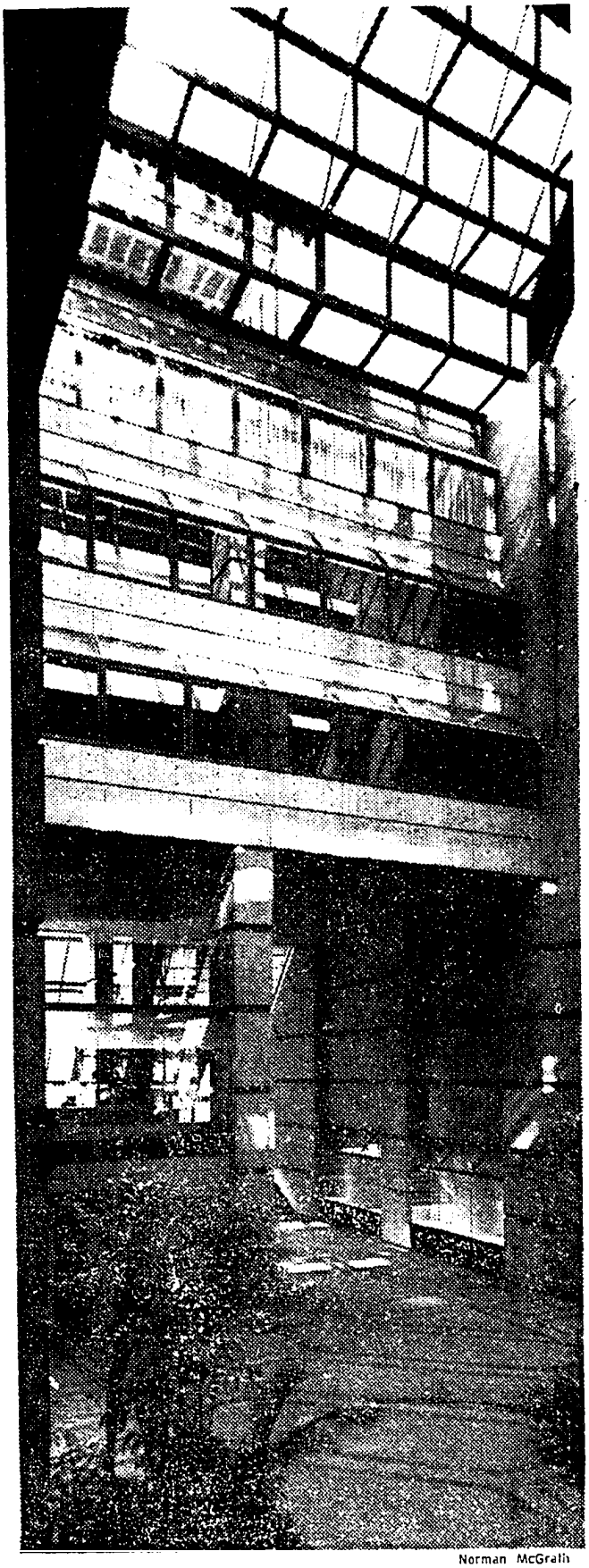

Norman McGrath

The Galleria's spectacular interior space—the winning result of mixed-use zoning

The Awards Game

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more. He knows that this is the ultimate creative achievement.

But he also knows, through empirically and often painfully acquired knowledge, and by being hit on the head with the fact repeatedly by critics and communities, that a beautiful building is not always a good building—paradoxical as that sounds—and that the opposite is also true. He knows that a building is both a human and an environmental act. Architecture saves. And architecture kills. Actually it does neither by itself, but only as it is an instrument used by society to fulfill its needs and provide its pleasures and to shape the nature of its existence.

And so the whole idea of urban design and environmental design has been accepted only fairly recently, as well as the heretical assertion that an ordinary accumulation of ordinary structures can be alive and work well, while an exceptional structure can be static, aloof and dead. These concepts shatter the architectural pieties of centuries.

The Design and Environment selections set out specifically to acknowledge these changes and the degree of success with which their challenge is being met. The 37 projects cited are an extraordinary grab-bag. Ann Ferebee, editor of the magazine, points out that many of the projects focus on the natural, rather than the built environment, and on what architects and designers are doing to preserve it. They range from the design of California power lines, a program to save Vermont's back roads and the management of national forest landscapes to city plazas and recycled buildings. The official categories were "environmental enhancement," or projects that preserve the natural landscape and improve the cityscape, architectural preservation and reuse of old buildings, including something called "lived-in environments," and urban design and planning.

Narrowly and technically, there is little "architecture" here at all. And yet the winners, while they include specialized designers and landscape firms, form a roster of some of the country's finest practitioners. Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer's Lewiston Artpark turns a chemical dump into a center for the contemporary visual and performing arts for the New York State Department of Parks and Recreation. A landscape and amenity plan by Lawrence Halprin and Associates knits together the high-rise towers of New York's Battery Park City plan by using the "negative" factor of the space between the buildings as the design catalyst for an attractive and livable setting.

When dealing in the more conventional stuff of building, the emphasis is often on the role of zoning and financing for the creation of public amenity, rather than for the making of a monument. New York's luxury Galleria tower by David Kenneth Specter is lauded for its spectacular urban spaces, made possible by the city's adoption of mixed-use zoning. Perfectly ordinary old buildings in Boston and Chicago are commended for the remodeling that has saved and upgraded them and their communities while keeping their residents in place.

None of this is the kind of thing found in architectural histories. Neither iconography nor immortality is served. Jonathan Barnett, the former head of New York City's innovative Urban Design Group and the director of the graduate program in urban design at the City College of the City University, sums up the point of view. "The problem of improving our environment, the physical surroundings that we live with every day, is the central design issue of our times."

Agreed. At the same time, may I offer three quiet cheers for the American Institute of Architects' insistence, still, in its Honor Awards, that the building solution deserves to be considered as a statement of esthetic elegance, intellectual clarity and architectural art. They are qualities found within the economic constraints of an apartment complex, such as Davis, Brody and Associates' Waterside in New York, or the costly sophistication of a private house by Richard Meier and Associates that is as much a design statement as a home.

These suave, specialized appeals to the senses and the intelligence offer rewards to the spirit that are not cancelled out or diminished by the new and necessary environmental awareness. On rare occasions, as in the beautifully refined solutions of this year's special award firm, Mitchell-Giurgola, they coexist. And the A.L.A. has conscientiously extended its awards categories to make that possible.

The fact is that the scope of architectural practice today is almost shattering in its potential and demands. The climate is not one of decline, in spite of the superficial signposts of a malfunctioning economy and the new-chic of abdicated ideals. We are actually at a new frontier. The awards programs are defining the way shelter now serves and expresses the standards of society. Architects don't just design; they agonize. They worry about their art and the world.