

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Informing Places [Commentary]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9j83k56b>

Journal

Places, 16(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Francis, Mark

Publication Date

2004-04-01

Peer reviewed

framework of a design or planning project, this latest round of awards continues this sensitivity to a questioning of values.

In any particular project, whose values dominate? How do we know, or at least find out? What guarantees do we give to the user? Who controls the content and conduct of research?

These questions open up further paths of inquiry. Who are the legitimate stakeholders? What are their interests, and how do the consequences of the research bear on those interests? What aspects of a project may benefit the self-interest of the researchers as opposed to those under study? All of these questions are more apt to be addressed today than in projects of the past.

A Final Word

One of the most elusive issues for these awards has been that of the design quality of projects and, related to that, the creative contributions of gifted designers.

To their credit, the awards program juries to date have

respected both research and design, narrowly and broadly conceived, and they have recognized extraordinary projects that have not satisfied criteria of thorough and explicit reasoning from research-based findings to design expression.

Some jurors have argued that, for these awards, the connection between research and design should be made explicit. But should explicitness be up to the authors or to the jury? Do we care how Mondrian thought about his wonderful series of abstractions of the tree? Or is our care more properly directed toward how we think about it and how we can appreciate it more fully? Doesn't reasoning from research to design imply exactly the kind of linear thinking that may not be characteristic of great designers?

If responsible social and environmental action requires such reasoning, and if the achievement of extraordinary quality requires the mysterious integrative processing of talented designers, can the two be reconciled? The EDRA/*Places* awards program is an ideal venue in which to continue to address this question!

Informing Places

Mark Francis

Design is not research; research is not design. This was long the view of both professional designers and scholarly researchers. On the one hand, design is principally an intuitive process involving invention, creativity, and independent action. Research, on the other, requires reflection, systematic investigation, and analysis of data. The two activities exist across a divide between understanding and action, knowledge and invention, theory and practice, meaning and form.

Such positions were fundamentally challenged in the 1960s with the development of the new field of environmental psychology.¹ At that moment increased interest in socially and environmentally responsive design also led to increased interest in design methods, the development of postoccupancy evaluation (the radical idea of returning to a project to see if it works as intended), and the emergence of design research. For thirty-three years the Environmental Design Research Association has been a leader in advancing this point of view. More recently, it

has been joined by *Places*, now in its sixteenth year of publication. Today, there is also a large and active group of designers and researchers who work together to try to improve design practice through research. Encouraged by a growing and cohesive body of published work in books, journal articles, and conference proceedings, this group provides a counterpoint to trends in high-style and fashionable design.²

Ten years ago, a few of us gathered in the back of a small café in Montreal to discuss the prospect of a new awards program to celebrate the very best of research-based design and design-based research, and bring it to the attention of practitioners.³ The idea was inspired in part from the demise of the *Progressive Architecture* Research Awards. But it also grew from the mutual desire of two different but like-minded groups (EDRA and *Places*) to explore how research could inform design, and design could inspire research. This intersection intrigued some of us who had worked for years to bridge the gap between

environmental-design research and design practice. The result are these awards, which recognize exemplary design research, place design, and place planning.

My observations here are based on a review of the material published on the awards program by *Places*, now in its sixth year—along my own experience as a jury member for this and other professional award programs. What impact, if any, has this program had on the making and understanding of places? Do the winners present a coherent body of work that can guide our thinking about designed and natural places? More importantly, can their theories and methods inform the making of future places?

The Purpose

The goal of the EDRA/*Places* Awards Program, as stated by its sponsors, is to bring exemplary place design and research to a larger audience beyond usual professional and academic boundaries. It is about the need for knowledge based not just on speculation and assumption but on reflection, research, and critical thinking. As Donlyn Lyndon pointed out in a 2000 editorial, this award program seeks to find work that helps designers to “learn to see and think with appropriate complexity.”

Unlike all other award programs, this one is concerned with places informed by research and research that informs places. A consistent idea has been on “informing”—trying to find projects where links are apparent between research and form, idea and action, assumption and evaluation. While juries have struggled with this notion each year, the winning projects show a coherent group of projects, all with some merging of design and research.

In addition to seeking the best work being done today, the intent has also been to present the projects in an informative and even provocative way. Published accounts appear each year in *Places* with project descriptions, high quality photos and plans, narratives by jury members, commentary by local professionals, and reflective articles by some jury members. Lacking is user and public commentary about projects, something that would help the jury and reader assess if projects are as successful as presented. Also missing are site visits and detailed evaluations of impacts, something that entrants could be required to provide.

The Awards

A look back at the first six years of the awards, as well as a look forward to the next years of the program provide evidence of a fledging but encouraging integration of research and design.

The thirty-six winning projects represent some of the very best work being done in environmental design

(see accompanying summary and analysis). What distinguishes almost all of them is that they are not single-author or even heroic design works. While most deal with the form and shape of places, each explores in some interesting way the deeper levels of place-making processes, collaborations, controversies—but most importantly guiding ideas and perspectives.

Juries have awarded projects in categories of place design, place planning (added in the third year due to the large number of unbuilt plans submitted) and place research. There have been fourteen winners in the design category (including one featured as both design and planning), eight planning projects, and fourteen in the research category. The six awards each year are drawn from over a hundred or more entries, a number that has grown over time. Unlike other award programs, the focus here has been on a smaller number of high quality projects, something that makes this program stand out from other professional award programs.

In addition, *Places* sometimes publishes, along with the winners, a number of entries the jury may deem particularly meritorious. Many of these are as interesting as the winners and illustrate the large body of exemplary work being done on the design, planning and evaluation of places including studio work, international housing design, and scholarly books on places.

The Winners

Winners have been as diverse in content as they are in geography and discipline. Winners have included several urban parks and open-space projects, neighborhood plans, a school, a corporate headquarters, regional landscape strategies, a street redesign study, a memorial (to Rosie the Riveter), community-wide urban design plans, and several books on topics ranging from plazas to healing gardens, mining reclamation, and building comfort. Taken together, these winners reflect a hopeful view of the quality of work being done today and the important contribution research is making to the design and management of urban and rural places.

Content analysis shows that landscapes made up the majority of winners, followed by books, neighborhood projects, buildings, and master plans. The greatest number of winning entrants have been from landscape architects, followed by urban designers, nonprofit organizations, architects, planners, psychologists and sociologists. It is noteworthy that winners have also included artists and art consultants, and that many of the projects have involved interdisciplinary collaborations between designers and artists, designers and communities, researchers and the

1998–2003 EDRA/Places Award Winners and Meritorious Projects

Design

Bryant Park, New York City (Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer; Olin Partnership)
 Waterworks Gardens, Seattle, WA (Lorna Jordan)
 Radnor Gateways Enhancement Strategy, PA (Ron Fleming, Townscape institute)
 Living Water Park, Chengdu, China (Betsy Damon; Fu Nan Rivers Renovation Bureau)
 Diggs Town, Norfolk, VA (Urban Design Associates; CMSS Architects)
 Thames Landscape Strategy, London (Kim Wilkie Environmental Design)
 Rosa Parks Elementary School, Berkeley, CA (Ratcliff Architects)
 Lafayette Square, Oakland, CA (Walter Hood)
 Gantry Plaza State Park, Queens, NY (Thomas Balsley with Lee Weintraub, Richard Sullivan, Laura Auerback, William Harris and Sam Lawrence)
 Constructing Memory: Commemorating Rosie the Riveter, Richmond, CA (The Office of Cheryl Barton, Susan Schwartzberg)
 Allegheny Riverfront Park, Pittsburgh, PA (Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, with Ann Hamilton and Michael Mercil)
 Cultural Landscape Goitzsche, Bitterfeld, Germany (Commission Cultural Landscape Goitzsche; Knoll Ecoplan) (recognized in both design and planning categories)
 Abercrombie & Fitch Headquarters, New Albany, OH (anderson architects p.c.)
 Outdoor Classrooms at Eib's Pond and Roy Wilkins Parks, New York City (Marpillero Pollak Architects, The Parks Council)

Planning

Hindman-Knott County Master Plan, Kentucky (Lander/Klein Landscape Architects)
 Portland Pedestrian Master Plan (City of Portland Office of Transportation)
 Above the Falls: A Master Plan for the Upper River in Minneapolis, Minnesota (URS/BRW, Inc.)
 Designing a City of Learning, Patterson, NJ (Roy Strickland; Edwin Duroy/Patterson Public Schools)
 New-Land-Marks, Philadelphia, PA (Fairmount Park Arts Association)
 Collier County Community Character Plan, Collier County, FL (Dover, Kohl and Partners)
 First Nations Community Planning Model, Atlantic Canada (Frank Palermo, Dalhousie University)
 Development Plan and AWI Vision for the Southwest Waterfront, Washington, D.C. (Beyer Blinder Belle; Hamilton Rabinowitz and Alschuler; Greenberg Consultants)

Research

Public Spaces, Public Life, Denmark (Jan Gehl/Lars Gemoze, Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts)
Blueprint for a Sustainable Bay Area, CA (Urban Ecology, Marcia McNally)
 Alzheimer's Special Care Units, New England (John Zeisel, Hearthstone Alzheimer Care)
With People in Mind: Design and Management of Everyday Nature (Steve Kaplan, Rachel Kaplan, Robert Ryan)
 Design for Comfort (Gail Brager, Richard de Dear)
 From Yard to Garden, Ames, Iowa (Susan Herrington, Kenneth Studtmann)
 Three Public Neighborhoods, Boston, MA (Lawrence Vale)
Healing Gardens: Therapeutic Benefits and Design Recommendations (Clare Cooper Marcus, Marni Barnes)
 Mississippi Floods: Designing a Shifting Landscape, Mississippi Basin (multistate) (Anuradha Mathur, Dilip da Cunha)
 The New York City Privately Owned Public Space Project (Jerold S. Kayden, NYC Department of Planning, Municipal Arts Society of New York)
 Growing up in Cities, 14 countries (Louise Chawla)
Technology and Place: Sustainable Architecture and the Blueprint Farm, Texas (Steven A. Moore)
Sento at Sixth and Main: Preserving Landmarks of Japanese Heritage, Seattle and California (Gail Dubrow with Donna Graves)
Reclaiming the American West, Western U.S. (Alan Berger)

**Published Projects/
Meritorious Entries**

North Philadelphia Urban Initiative Project (Temple University School of Architecture)
 Urban and Housing Project, Karimabad, Pakistan (MIT)
 Los Angeles Central Library and Maguire Garden (Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer; Larry Halprin)
 Tanglewood Master Plan (4Architecture)
 Beth Israel Memorial Chapel (Daniel Solomon/Gary Strang)
The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body and Design (Galen Cranz)
The Long Walk: The Placemaking Legacy of Howard University (Harry Robinson and Hazel Ruth Edwards)
 Santa Ursula Public Lavandra and Water Collection System, Cuernavaca, Mexico (Daniel Winterbottom and Design Build Studio, University of Washington)
People and the River, Chicago (Paul Gobster, Lynne Westphal)
The Evaluative Image of the City (Jack Nasar)
 People, Memory and Haptic Experience: A Rural Way of Knowing (Maire O'Neill)
 Listening to Lost Voices, Forest Park, St. Louis (St. Louis Development Corporation)
 Cultivating a Civic Vision: The Seattle Charrettes (Douglas Kelbaugh)
 Enabling Everyday Places: PRIDE Industrial Park, Philadelphia (Brown and Keener Urban Design)
 Cardada—Reconsidering a Mountain, Switzerland (Paolo Burgi)

Content Analysis

Place Types

1998–2003 EDRA/Places Awards

Buildings	3
Schools	1
Corporate Headquarters	1
Alzheimer's Care Units	1
Sites/Landscapes	9
Parks	7
Schoolyards	1
Memorials	1
Streets	1
District/Neighborhood	4
Citywide	5
Regional	4
Statewide	1
Multistate	2
Global	2
Built Projects	
Master Plans	
Design Guidelines	2
Books	5
Studio Projects*	-
* Published but not winner	

Winners

1998–2003 EDRA/Places Awards

Landscape Architects	12
Urban Designers	7
Non-Profit Organizations	6
Architects	5
Planners	4
Psychologists	4
Public Agencies	3
Sociologists	2
Artist	2
Cultural Consultant	1

Geography of Places

1998–2003 EDRA/Places Awards

New York - New York City	4
California - SF/Bay Area	4
Pennsylvania	3
Washington - Seattle	2
Massachusetts	2
Minnesota	2
Western U.S.	1
D.C.	1
Florida	1
Iowa	1
Kentucky	1
New Jersey	1
Ohio	1
Oregon	1
Texas	1
Virginia	1
Canada	1
China	1
Denmark	1
England	1
Germany	1
International	1

Jury Background

1998–2003 EDRA/Places Awards

Architects	10
Landscape Architects	7
Environmental Psychologists	6
Planners	3
Urban Designers	2
Public/Non Profit Administrators	1

Methods Used (Partial List)

1998–2003 EDRA/Places Awards Award Winners

Participatory methods
Case studies
Research on historic places
Interviews
Observations
Archival research
Personal memories
Photographs
Typologies

public, and between ecologists, community developers and planners. Several projects have reflected the multiple roles that people take in place-making—such as researcher and teacher, practitioner and author, designer and researcher.

The high number of landscape winners may be explained by the fact that landscape architecture today typically includes research and evaluation as part of the scope of projects. The low number of buildings as winners may reflect a greater resistance of architects in adopting advances in research, although there are many more research-based building projects that should be submitted.

The projects also cover a wide geography of places. New York City, San Francisco, Pennsylvania, Washington State and Massachusetts all have had multiple winners. Winning projects also came from ten other states and nineteen countries. One of the most encouraging trends is the diverse scale of projects with many done at the citywide, regional, statewide, multistate and even global scale. While places are local inhabited environments, they are also part of a larger community of places, a fact that collectively these winners make clear. Especially rich is the mix of methods people bring to their work beyond typical pencil and paper or computer techniques including postoccupancy evaluation, case studies, typologies, observations, interviews, research on historic places, personal memories, and symposia.

Particularly striking is that many of the projects do not simply create or evaluate places but result in unique outcomes including books, voter initiatives, curriculum, training materials, or public-awareness campaigns. This speaks well for what jury member Randy Hester called the need for greater “inquiry, substance, outcome or advancement” (*Places* 14.1, 2001, p. 34). Good place-making often involves a proactive approach for professionals and researchers that start well before playing clients or project funding and last long after projects are built.

The Juries

Jury deliberations published in *Places* are especially informative and cover a range of issues central to environmental design today. They go beyond form and fashion to focus on content and impact. How does work shape both places and people? How is research-based design good place-making? Must form result from the research for the project to be successful? Can the intuitive hypotheses that often guide design be derived from research? I expect these issues will continue to plague future juries as this still-young field continues to evolve and define itself.

The juries also represent a unique coming together of points of view from a wide array of fields and backgrounds

not common in most evaluations of designed places. Jury members have included leading design practitioners as well as academics, architects, landscape architects, urban designers, planners, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, deans and department chairs of schools of environmental design, and nonprofit administrators. The organizers have done an excellent job of attracting outstanding jury members, although they could do a better job of including public officials, such as mayors, and members of the public in their mix.

Noticeable is a marked absence among the winners of New Urbanist plans and projects, even though several leaders of the New Urbanism have been on juries. This may be due to the short history of built projects and lack of evaluation documenting the benefits of New Urbanist projects. Several of the winners, such as Bryant Park, have been well publicized before or won previous awards. I would like to see more modest and lesser-known work featured. One important benefit of awards programs and design competitions is to recognize up-and-coming designers, planners and researchers and bring their work to the attention of professionals and clients.

Each jury also brought its own set of interests to the discussion. The jury I participated in (year two) struggled between the differences between built and proposed projects. Another jury (year three) paid particular attention to projects that involved participation. This past year’s jury (year six) was especially concerned with inventive form, and whether place research in itself is good place-making.

Future Issues

The EDRA/*Places* Awards Program has brought to light a cohesive and critical mass of high quality work on places. In this regard, both EDRA and *Places* have done environmental design a great service by running this program. For *Places*, it has served to expand the number of stimulating projects it brings to its readers, and served to focus debate on the essential qualities that make good places. For the Environmental Design Research Association, it has opened its doors to more practitioners and served to close the long-standing gap between theory, research, and design practice. It has also brought place design to the attention of academics and researchers, which should serve to produce more design-oriented work.

One of the implications of the work presented is the limits of current design education and curriculum. I do not think we are doing a good job of preparing students to use state-of-the-art methods in design research, and even a poorer job of integrating this approach in the studio. The fact that such a large body of high-quality work exists is

encouraging, but I worry that this small but energetic group of scholars and designers alone can turn the tide from current fashions in design. I also wonder if the categories used in the awards are really that helpful, serving to further separate design from research. Perhaps the window should be opened wider to encourage the very best place-making work—be it design, planning, research or management.

In the end, what is most interesting about this awards program is that they focus as much on ideas about places as the places themselves—why they are important, how they are designed and managed, and how people come to attach meaning to them. Form alone is not as important as how the form develops or evolves over time. The emphasis here is informing future action through understanding how places—both good and bad—become what they are. It is place debate and design criticism at its best.

The EDRA/*Places* Awards is a unique and informative source of the best work being done at the intersection of design, planning and research. As the awarded projects find their way into office brochures, web pages, annual reports, and tenure packages, there are encouraging signs the program is having an impact. The real test will be if this work successfully changes the minds of educators and students, practitioners and their clients, and the public. I, for one, am hopeful of this.

Notes

1. A watershed moment for research-based design was a modest request in the early 1960s from an architect designing a children's psychiatric hospital in the Bronx.

Was there any research, he asked, that could make his design more fitting for children, staff and visitors? Three psychologists at the City University of New York—Leanne Rivlin, Harold Proshansky, and Bill Ittelson—eagerly responded, and eventually helped write a program to guide the architect's work. Though this project won no design awards, additional requests from architects and city agencies soon led Rivlin, Proshansky and Ittelson to establish a doctoral program in Environmental Psychology at CUNY. The first of its kind in the country, its aim was to train a group of design researchers who could work hand in hand with architects and planners to improve the quality of the built environment.

2. This group meets at conferences by organizations such as the Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA), Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture (CELA), and many others, publishes their work in journals such as *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, *Landscape Journal*, and *Journal of Architectural Education*, and supports itself through commissions and grants from nonprofit organizations, community development groups and public agencies.

3. As I remember this meeting, it included Donlyn Lyndon and Todd Bressi of *Places* and Jack Nasar and myself from EDRA. Serving as somewhat of a bridge between the two groups was Randy Hester, a *Places* Associate Editor and longtime EDRA member. In retrospect, I thought the idea would be a hard sell, but we all agreed that a new awards program was needed and was in the interest of both *Places* and EDRA. The pitch to the EDRA board the following year in Salt Lake City proved more difficult, but in the end they agreed to try it for a year. I was not part of the similar discussion with the *Places* board, but imagine that it involved similar hesitation and concern, especially about how to sustain it financially over the long term. A grant from the Graham Foundation helps keep it alive past the first year. The fact the awards program has completed its sixth year is a testament to its the importance of this partnership.

The Place of Research

David Brain

It is an illuminating and inspiring experience to review the history of the EDRA/*Places* Awards Program as it has been beautifully documented in the pages of *Places* since 1998. Reading through the descriptions of the award winners, one gets an introduction to a wide range of issues and challenges addressed by designers in the making of good places. The awards have honored a great variety of projects, from the detailed design of specific gardens, parks or buildings, to designs intended to bring coherence

and identity to whole stretches of river corridor or the development of an entire region.

Operating at different scales and in response to a wide range of mandates, the award winners have provided an impressive survey of the challenge of making places that are engaging, satisfying, livable, sensitive to the beauty and functioning of natural landscapes, reflective of the character and social life of communities, and responsive to human needs and experiences.