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The Changing Face of Urban Excellence

The *Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence* (RBA) and Architect Magazine's *Progressive Architecture* (P/A) Awards are two of the most distinguished award programs that recognize pioneers in the field of urban design and development. Both awards laud creativity and innovative design and are highly dynamic in the sense that the winners are selected by changing and interdisciplinary selection committees. But at their cores, these awards recognize fundamentally different achievements of urban design and though the selection criteria for the awards are quite general and vary greatly from year to year depending on the diverse selection committees, the winners often differ significantly in terms of style, form, function, and interaction with the surrounding environment. The biennial Rudy Bruner Award recognizes innovators in the process of American urban placemaking with a particular emphasis on developments that complement and enhance the neighboring community, attract new growth and energy, and serve as models for urban regeneration and evolution. Meanwhile, the annual Progressive Architecture Award distinguishes the world's boldest architectural and planning projects that embody the spirit of developmental progress and inventive risk-taking in architecture and urban design. As the challenges and focal points of urban design evolve throughout the years, so too do these awards. By highlighting common issues of city design and development, these renowned awards programs form a responsive symbiotic relationship with urban design itself, as the awards influence the communal definition of urban excellence and progressive design just as their selection criteria are shaped by the ever-changing nature of the field.

The eligibility criteria for the Rudy Bruner Award are surprisingly few in number, but the ones that do exist subtly reveal the central nature of the award and the features it celebrates. Most importantly, eligible projects must be real places rather than simply plans or designs, a requirement which allows the selection committee to assess the social and economic impacts of the developments, particularly the manner in which each site interfaces with the host community. In the words of Seattle's former mayor Norman Rice, "it is an award for those who believe that social equity,

economic opportunity and environmental stewardship can be embraced to sustain all America's communities." Though the concept of placemaking and a proclivity towards community-driven projects have been continual features of the selection committee's decisions, the award criteria change significantly between years depending on the diverse group of individuals composing the committee. And though these criteria are decidedly variable over time and seem to be strongly influenced by the character of the committee, the selection process – consisting of an initial meeting of the selection committee to narrow down the entries to five finalists followed by site visits by the Bruner Foundation staff and finally a second meeting of the committee at which the Gold Medal winner is selected – is quite consistent throughout the history of the RBA.

The 1997 RBA Selection Committee was spearheaded by Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke, who was complemented by a small group of developers, financiers, and academics. The inclusion of corporate-minded thinkers and developers on the committee appears to have heavily influenced the award selection criteria which placed an emphasis on several managerial metrics of excellence such as entrepreneurial vision, cost effectiveness, and creativity. In this spirit, the 1997 awards committee assessed excellence almost as if they were reviewing applications as business plans, paying considerable attention to features such as entrepreneurship, replicability, and potential for economic growth. For example, the Gold Medal recipient *The Times Square* – a project involving restoring a decaying hotel into a large supportive housing facility for homeless, low-income, and elderly residents – was lauded for its “‘entrepreneurial approach’...to address the serious unmet needs of this population.” Similarly, the committee questions for site visits to many of the silver medalists are peppered with concerns about financial stability and potential for commercial use.

The 1997 awards also recognized projects with high replicability that moved beyond prevailing concepts about what is feasible and achievable to serve as models for urban excellence. This was particularly evident in the committee's selection of *Project Row Houses*, an urban revitalization program in inner city Houston that transformed 22 abandoned houses into an art complex with social programs including housing for single mothers, a mixed media and performing arts center, daycare and after-school programs, and a community empowerment center. *Project Row Houses* was commended for establishing an effective model for the reclamation of inner-city

neighborhoods with art as a catalyst to stimulate constructive dialogue of social issues, a model which was later applied to projects in four other cities. Ultimately, the group of 1997 RBA winners highlights a group of common issues such as decaying neighborhoods, poverty, and discrimination to which urban designers respond through a unique combination of entrepreneurial vision and creativity in implementation.

Eight years later, the selection committee for the same award in 2005 was chaired by Maurice Cox, former mayor of Charlottesville, and supplemented by a larger team of architects, developers, project managers, and CDC directors. In this year, the award was titled *Reinventing Downtown* and was presented to a collection of outstanding places that succeeded in reenergizing downtown areas through robust transit-oriented initiatives, outstanding beautification and art-based places, and a general commitment to meeting the responsive needs of changing populations. To the 2005 committee, “design remain[ed] important, but [was] considered in the context of the integrated effect of all aspects of placemaking,” including social responsibility, empowerment of local communities, and the quality of leadership and guiding vision. In their selection of winners such as the *Heidelberg Project*, a series of local art installations and art education programs in east Detroit, the committee shed light on the process through which new visions of place, identity, and community can be established through the re-imagination of downtown areas and their larger urban context. The choice of winners of the 2005 RBA suggests that urban design is fundamentally about meeting the needs of people and their broader communities and that urban design as a practice and art must evolve and adapt to address the changing necessities of dynamic populations and environments.

In gentle contrast to the RBA, Architect Magazine’s P/A Awards embody the spirit of progressive and daring developments and tend to focus much more on design than the Bruner Award. A critical feature of the award is that it can be presented to designs, proposals, and research projects rather than limiting the selection to existing developments. This results in the submission of an array of truly innovative designs that often boldly challenge the traditional practice of urban design. Like the RBA, the P/A award also delegates its selection process to a diverse and changing group of architects and planners who bring their own unique backgrounds and perspectives to each year’s competition such that the winning criteria for the award evolve and alter significantly over time. In

relation to the practice of urban design, Maurice Cox of the 2005 P/A jury (the same Maurice Cox of the 2005 RBA Selection Committee) wrote that the award has “announced emerging trends and crystallized them,” a statement that is highly indicative of the power of these urban design awards to influence the public conception of exceptional and revolutionary design.

Particularly emblematic of the unconventional design and architecture that characterize P/A winners was the 2007 P/A award presented to Marc Boutin Architects for the design of *The Calgary Center for Global Community*, a massive and futuristic proposal for merging education and communication through a 25,000 square-foot community center with a gallery, garden, lecture hall, and telecommunications center. The 2007 awards also seemed to follow a theme of unification, which the design for the *Calgary Center* addressed through an innovative combination of a large plaza beneath a set of railroad tracks and a garden above the tracks. The P/A jury commended the design which boldly proclaimed that divided places can be woven together and reunited through creative architecture and planning. Two years earlier, the 2005 jury awarded *L.A. Now: Volume 3*, an applied research project spearheaded by UCLA urban design faculty resulting in a series of proposals targeted at the design of 35,000 new housing units and related commercial and institutional facilities in downtown Los Angeles. The “five disparate interpretive proposals” composing *L.A. Now* were praised for an inventive fusion of urbanism, research, and architecture that effectively addressed the rapid population growth, inadequate infrastructure, degrading environment, and excessive traffic of the LA metropolitan area. Indeed, throughout the past ten years, the P/A Award seems to have paid increasing recognition to community impact and the relation of developments to their surrounding environments. For instance, *L.A. Now's* award is a far cry from the 2000 P/A Award presented to Steven Holl Architects for Simmons Hall, the newest undergraduate dormitory on the MIT campus, which is undoubtedly a stunning and inventive work of architecture but has been highly criticized for failing to engage its end of the campus or transform the decaying Cambridge landscape along an aging railroad track.

Ultimately, the P/A Award's greatest shortcoming lies in the fact that it is nearly impossible to gage the effectiveness of a place that does not exist, despite the detail and creativity of a plan or design. Through its thorough site visit process including extensive interviews and close observation

of use patterns, the RBA is better-equipped to assess how developments contribute to their host communities and if they deliver the promised results. A better process yet would involve the selection of a group of semi-finalists (perhaps eight to ten) to be narrowed down to five *after* site visits, such that there is less risk of a site that appears exceptional on a paper application but fails to deliver in real life receiving an award. Furthermore, by limiting applicants to the continental USA, the RBA has more room for detailed analysis and scrutiny than the P/A award's selection process which at times seems limited by a lack of structure and rigorous investigation. The Bruner Award devotes the first ten or so pages of each award book to profiling the selection committee, describing the selection process, and capturing the spirit of the thorough debate of the year's committee. Each book also concludes with an engaging segment titled "What We Learned About Urban Excellence" which offers insightful perspectives into the nature of the awards for the year and helps to create a strong sense of theme and identity for each awards cycle. Contrastingly, the P/A awards, which are limited to a much smaller magazine feature rather than an entire book, preface the presentation of winning entrants only with a succinct thematic paragraph and a brief introduction of the jury.

Both awards have taken the ideal approach of a changing selection committee formed of a diverse group of individuals whose varied backgrounds and perspectives are highly conducive to the continuous evolution of standards for urban excellence and progressive design. Along these lines, the introduction to the 2007 P/A Awards cites the program's "open-endedness" and "immediacy" as among its greatest strengths. Indeed, maintaining full turnover in each year's committee ensures that the awards do not fall victim to stagnancy or repetition and allows the specific criteria of each award to respond to the changing face of urban design. On a broader scale, both awards together succeed in serving as a representative model for a field that is shaped by a motley assortment of people – from local community members to academics and politicians – and tasked with the challenging endeavor of adapting to unique community needs through innovative, progressive, and effective design. While the particular themes of each award change from year to year, these award programs embody a vision for a dynamic and responsive urban future that is limited only by the potential of our collective imagination.