

Negotiating Implicit Theoretical Agendas

Harrison S. Fraker, Jr.

Every awards jury goes through a process of trying to understand and interpret the criteria for selecting winners. While this is generally an open discussion and debate about how specific projects fulfill published criteria; invariably, the theoretical interests and conceptual biases of each jury member also play a role, implicitly or explicitly. The 2002 EDRA/*Places* awards jury negotiated a particularly interesting set of theoretical issues, both explicit and implicit, that are worth discussing.

Not surprisingly some of the awards were relatively straightforward to select, especially in the Place Research category. The jury was able to arrive at an agreement on questions about whether the research method was clear and rigorous and about whether the findings were significant and—or transformative, based on empirical evidence in the submissions. For example, “Growing Up in Cities” was chosen as an exemplary extension of Kevin Lynch’s early work on how people construct a sense of place, an image of their world, particularly studies he led in the 1970s of children’s environments throughout the world. Through participatory projects with children, it identifies critical urban design criteria for urban spaces that successfully serve children’s needs. There is evidence that the work is having an important impact on local and national planning policy.

Steven Moore’s ethnographic and theoretical case study, *Technology and Place: Sustainable Architecture and the Blueprint Farm*, seemed to avoid any ideological differences among jury members as well. Through his close analysis of the facts of the case as seen by five competing networks of interest at work on the farm, he reveals fundamental disagreements about the role of technology and its objects. To the jury, Moore’s message—that sustainable things are only as successful as the social constructs and practices by which they are implemented and maintained—seemed both eloquently argued and of profound significance to both architectural practice and theory.

Two of the winners in the Place Planning category also transcended any implicit or explicit theoretical differences among the jury, but more by the sheer strength of their initial hypotheses than by careful analysis. “Designing a City of Learning: Patterson New Jersey” harnesses people’s interest in the education of their children as a strategy for rebuilding communities. By re-conceiving urban schools as something other than self-contained boxes or isolated campuses, the planning hypothesis is to weave them into the urban fabric, to use them to revitalize urban neighborhoods, to draw lesson plans from local resources. The publication then presents convincing diagrams for how this can be accomplished in specific locations. The implications of this idea were perceived by the jury to be profound, not

only enriching education with an expanded curriculum that is place based, but also creating the means for restoring historic urban fabric and reconstructing the public realm.

“New•Land•Marks,” was chosen for having an equally compelling first proposition: public art should not just be privately conceived art in public spaces; it should “understand the community, not merely decorate it.” The work of the association lays out an innovative and effective program for engaging community involvement. A key mechanism is a tripartite contract between communities, artists and the association in which nothing can be built that is not completely endorsed by the community. While not breaking new ground in the methods of participatory design, its innovation is applying participatory processes to private artistic practice, creating a more meaningful and engaging public realm.

All four of these winners, which were the least theoretically problematic for the jury, share a common theoretical interest in discovering and foregrounding activities and social processes of the everyday. The first two used careful analysis and proven methods to uncover important insights. The latter two used hypotheses about everyday activities that re-position them with new meaning and potential for design. The theoretical nuances of these practices have been explored in the writings of Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord and Frederic Jameson. But all four projects seemed to avoid any ideological controversy, not because of their theoretical underpinnings, but because they did not appear to be promoting any prescriptive aesthetic or design agenda.

On the other hand, the selection of the final two winners (one in design and one in planning) revealed problematic theoretical differences. Different interpretations of the theoretical design agenda represented in the projects caused serious debate, which was further complicated by the fact that for many of the design and planning submissions, the grounding in research was ambiguous.

What is a meaningful relationship between design and research was a vexing question that recurred throughout the jury. One of the design projects in the final cut, “Cardada: Revisiting a Mountain,” elicited the most explicit and implicit theoretical debate. The project presents a series of exquisitely designed places, constructed episodes, that highlight particular environmental processes or phenomena. The architectural elements are highly abstract and minimalist in expression, yet executed in beautiful materials and with careful attention to detail.

All the jury members agreed that this was the most hauntingly poetic submission. The problem for the jury was that the project presented no research basis for its

design proposition, although it included user testimonies to the powerful experience it elicited. Some jury members argued that the design begged interesting questions about understatement, silence, mystery and wonder that were worthy of research. Other jurors said that without evidence, we were just indulging in personal speculation; that to give the project an award would contradict one of the EDRA/*Places* advertised criteria that “submissions should address the relationship between design research and design outcomes.” Ultimately, advocates for the project could not overcome this challenge. In letting it go, some observed, however, that the project symbolized the difference between the cultures of research and design, and that with a slightly different attitude and presentation the embedded research issues could have been made more operative and relevant.

The jury wrestled with the same question about the relationship between research and design in selecting “Allegheny Riverfront Park” as the only design winner. The design concept not only solved a number of environmental and engineering challenges but also managed to run a gauntlet of federal, state and local codes and regulations, and integrated local interest and participation as well, creating a public place of stunning aesthetic appeal. The jury recognized that the designers conducted local field research in selecting plant materials that would survive the flooding and ice flows in an inundation zone. Jurors praised the elegant construction and detailing of the continuous fourteen-foot-wide pathway that in some sections is cantilevered out over the river not only to avoid bridge abutments but also to free up space for plantings in more protected soil conditions. The beauty of the project is carried out in every detail, even integrating the delicate vision of several artists in the paving. The result is a work of tectonic richness where research into the making of things transforms one of the toughest environments imaginable into a place for the human spirit.

This year’s awards program received the largest number of planning submissions that could be described as typical comprehensive planning proposals for cities and municipalities. Several excellent examples of this kind of work made it into the final group of projects the jury considered. The most theoretically charged debate occurred over one group of projects which could be described as orthodox New Urbanist or neo-traditional infill versus a group of projects whose design guidelines give explicit requirements for bulk, height and set-backs for blocks and buildings and specific guidelines for streets, giving prescribed shape to the public realm, yet purposely not prescribing building types or regional styles.

For some jury members this latter planning strategy was just a remake of failed zoning practices, leading to placeless neighborhoods with no character. To others, the New Urbanist strategies did not allow for building innovations or new building types and represent a nostalgic representation of a past that no longer exists or is meaningful. Several exemplary projects on both sides fell by the wayside as this debate remained unresolved. In the end “*Toward Better Places: The Community Character Plan for Collier County, Florida*” was chosen. Despite the project’s obvious New Urbanist sympathies, presentation style and analytical technique, the jury felt that the emphasis on developing a carefully articulated system and hierarchy of county roads, integrated with a vision for restoring and maintaining the ecological infrastructure, as a way of further distinguishing the special place characteristics of rural towns and neighborhoods was innovative and groundbreaking. In other words, the more comprehensive system thinking of the New Urbanist agenda overwhelmed any disagreements among the jury may have had about stylistic theming or class-based prejudices.

In the end, the jury was pleased with the projects selected as significant and deserving winners. However, the jury discussion and debate itself raised fundamental questions. To what extent should the relationship between the design process and research investigation be explicit? When a design is based on established assumptions about people’s experience of the environment, and there is documentation of a powerful user response, is the design research based? In fact, does user participation in the design process ground the work in research? Obviously, the answer is that it depends, and it depends in part on theoretically laden differences in aesthetic preferences and different attitudes about what constitutes legitimate evidence. Without such differences juries might be more predictable but much less interesting.