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## Places

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### Author

Brain, David

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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.

As a sociologist with a design background, I very much appreciate the idea of combining awards for design and research in the same program. Although the integration isn't perfect, it has seemed to produce a new level of sensitivity. The awards for design and planning seem consistent in recognizing efforts that are appropriately self-conscious, that include a clear articulation of the grounds on which they claim to know what they are doing, and that in many cases take advantage of different kinds of available knowledge. The awards for place-based research consistently recognize work that is either explicitly aimed at producing clear directives for the design of places, or, at the very least, clearly engages issues relevant to design as an intentional form-giving process.

One of the most significant and useful aspects of the program, in my opinion, is the relative extent to which *Places* has made the jury process transparent. In addition to descriptions and brief critical reviews of each of the projects, we are given tantalizing comments by jurors themselves, hinting at some of the differences underlying their selections. We are also given short essays by some of the jurors reflecting on the experience. In their commentary, jurors often offer important observations with regard to overall patterns in the submissions and emergent agendas among the jurors themselves. I would suggest that this is the case not just within each jury but over the years and between juries.

In reviewing the awards over the years, I was struck by a few questions that I thought worthy of more emphasis and discussion. My observations are organized below under three headings, each of which bleeds into the other: design, place, and research.

### **Design**

On the design side, there seemed surprisingly few projects and little commentary that addressed those aspects of place-making that we might associate with urbanism, and much more emphasis on landscape. Several awards were given to urban parks or squares (Bryant Park in New York in 1998, Lafayette Square in Oakland in 2000), and these are certainly wonderful projects. But it was striking that there were only two projects that seemed to directly address issues of neighborhood: the work by Lawrence J. Vale investigating perceptions of public-housing neighborhoods among residents, and applying this understanding to redesigning these neighborhoods ("Three Public Neighborhoods," 2000); and Urban Design Associates' dramatic transformation of public housing in Diggs Town (1999). Otherwise, there seemed surprisingly little representation of the challenge of designing neighborhoods in

different settings, from the inner city to the rural hamlet.

This is not just a question of the scale of design—somewhere between the building and the region—or of the particular kind of geographic entity or social unit at stake. It should also be understood as a question of the temporal dimensions of place-making. Although there has been some discussion over the years of projects that reflect certain things about the historical past of a place, I saw less attention to the ways in which the design of a place may, in itself, be part of the making of history. I know there is a recognition of this temporal dimension in work like the Community Character Plan for Collier County by Dover, Kohl and Partners (2002). But I didn't see any explicit discussion of the practice and meaning of designing places that will be made in collaboration with future generations.

### **Place**

In the descriptions of many projects, references to the "place-based" character of the design were sometimes too abstract, referring to aspects of the specificity of place without always substantiating claims that these specificities were operationally significant. One of the challenges in trying to think systematically about "place" as a social phenomenon is that *places*, by definition, tend to resist generalization and reduction, even as they become part of our repertoire of typification and institutionalization.

In general, therefore, I thought that the phrase "place-based" is sometimes used a little loosely and perhaps unreflectively. I always worry that "place" as a critical concept is susceptible to being invoked without sufficient critical care, appearing as a kind of talisman for the presumed authenticity of the local. For my tastes, I'd like to see more discussion of the different kinds and conceptions of place being mobilized in different projects. One exception here is the commentary by Karen Franck, under the title "What is This Place? What Could it Be?" (*Places* 14.1, 2001, p. 30).

In the research category, there seemed to be no distinction drawn between the kind of research that produces generalizable knowledge, and the kind of research that is a matter of assembling data about a place, often with the assistance of concerned citizens and stakeholders. It is very important to be clear about the difference between knowing relevant things about a particular place for the purpose of making design and planning decisions, and knowing, in general, about the conditions that affect the quality and character of places. Aside from the methodological issue of being clear about the foundations of one's knowledge, one needs to be clear about the difference between technical knowledge (and the place of technical experts in the process) and the knowledge of citizens and stakeholders.

Projects like Roy Strickland's "City of Learning" (2002) are something else altogether, putting forward not only a design solution to a familiar problem, but a thorough reformulation of a whole set of problems related to education, the integration of schools into neighborhoods, the revitalization of decaying inner-city neighborhoods, and more.

One of the methodological difficulties encountered by research on "place" is that the object of investigation is not simply given as an unproblematic or self-evident thing. If place can be understood as "practiced space," as one juror commented (quoting de Certeau), then it is a social phenomenon characterized by a symbolically constructed identity, by relations to other places, and by a history. It becomes both more difficult to circumscribe the thing you are studying and more important to pay attention to the way you define the field as well as the object of inquiry.

This is why research such as John Zeisel's on the design of Alzheimer's special care units (1998) can look so strong: it is relatively (and I do mean relatively) easy to draw the boundaries around the thing under study, to construct a robust typological conceptualization of the place, and compare outcomes across cases. Given that most places are what they are at least in part because they are configurations of historically specific conditions, "place-based" research has to begin with the tricky work of abstracting some kind of typological characterization. This can sometimes mean abstracting away from the very things that make a place meaningful or valuable, or abstracting in ways that might obscure the patterns that matter for one purpose, while illuminating the patterns that matter for other purposes.

By contrast, in the Alzheimer's care unit, the criteria of salience can be derived with a lot more clarity and certainty, given the well-defined therapeutic purpose of the institution and the designers' relatively unambiguous charge. Just as it is harder to design successful places that are less functionally specific, it is a lot harder to do "place-based" research, or research relevant to place-making, when you are dealing with places that are more idiosyncratic and historically contingent, and functionally more "open minded" (as Michael Walzer once described urban public spaces).

Many of the projects clearly recognized the importance of participation as one way to deal with this kind of complexity. And in a few cases the significance of a project is to be found not in the evident brilliance or creativity of the design but in the way the project reflected the building of a certain kind of local knowledge and place-making capacity. Two examples are the Appalachian Community Development Initiative in Knott County, Kentucky (2000) and the Community Character Plan for Collier County (2002). Both efforts reflect a certain understanding of the character of a

place back to its residents, with the intention of empowering them to do a better job of becoming what they aspire to be.

Stephan Klein raised some excellent questions about the importance of participation, suggesting that it should not just be a token nod to holding a few public workshops to make people feel involved. In the contemporary world, he observed, "participation all too often becomes an instrument for solidifying status quos and maintaining current, often asymmetrical power distributions" (*Places* 14.1, 2001, p. 39). In this regard, I was surprised not to see more submissions that had to do with the development of tools to systematize local knowledge.

There are always questions of representativeness in participation: who IS the public that participates? Behind the questions of representativeness, however, I think there are more fundamental questions concerning what participation is really supposed to accomplish. It's not just a matter of figuring out what kinds of participation are more "effective." But effective at what? In relation to what kind of collective purposes?

Among award winners so far the question of the process of place-making seems to be more clearly engaged in larger-scale projects, where there is often a required public process. But even then it doesn't always seem to be very clearly posed. Stephan Klein pointed this out: "Too many of them included statements such as 'the public participated in a series of workshops,' without ever mentioning who the 'public' consisted of, what the workshops accomplished, or whether the participants had decision-making power or only offered suggestions or provided information about existing conditions" (*Places* 14.1, 2001, pp. 39-40). Patsy Owens raised similar questions the preceding year, noting that few submissions made effective use of new communication technologies (*Places* 13.1, 2000, p. 34).

Participation often seems to be reduced to a matter of simply generating "input"—data to be crunched into a report as a kind of legitimating nod to democratic process. By contrast, real engagement between designers or planners and residents, participation could potentially be a more fruitful (if risky) process. Such a strategy would go beyond merely ensuring that all categories of stakeholders are heard. It would ask what kind of capacity for sustained engagement one is creating in and through a work of design. And engagement in what? In their discussion of the Diggs Town project, Ray Gindroz and Stephanie Bothwell referred to their project as an "architecture of engagement." It is worth thinking a lot harder about the various kinds of engagement that might be at stake in different kinds of places, at different levels of scale.

In this regard, although there were a few references to

Dolores Hayden's *The Power of Place*, I was struck by the fact that none of the design projects or the research seemed to focus much attention on the way places can be a focus, a reflection, an instrument, or a resolution of different kinds of social conflict. Even when the projects clearly implied the relevance of such issues, I didn't see a lot of attention to the problematic nature of collective memory and the challenge of memorializing a past about which there are mixed feelings. The same can be said for struggles over interests and identities reflected in public space and issues surrounding inner-city revitalization and the cultural dimensions of gentrification.

The above comments are, of course, not intended as criticism of the awards program as such. I was greatly impressed by the extent to which the projects selected and the comments of the jurors all showed sensitivity to issues of history, community participation, and the social complexity of place. The critical comments of the jurors were especially good for raising many of the issues that I thought were missing in the projects themselves. To a certain extent, these observations reflect limitations in the way the connections between design and research are generally being drawn—from both sides.

## Research

As a social scientist, I found the selection of design projects to be much more varied and representative than the research projects. Much of the research is in the “environmental and behavior” genre, studies that look for the psychological or behavioral effects of specific design decisions. John Zeisel's work on the design of special care units for Alzheimer's patients is the most impressively detailed example of this. Marni Barnes's and Clare Cooper Marcus's collection of work on “healing gardens” is another excellent example (2000). At a more general level, there is also Jan Gehl's *Public Space, Public Life* and the recognition of the importance of the study of varied kinds of interaction in public space by the Copenhagen Group (1998). Then there is the sort of data collection represented by the *Blueprint for a Sustainable Bay Area* (1998), the Portland Pedestrian Master Plan (2000), or the Community Character Plan for Collier County (2002), all of which involve drawing on past research as well as on efforts to collect data reflecting the views and experiences of citizens in the area. One unusual project is the international research initiative called Growing Up in Cities (2002), which revisits an earlier UNESCO-funded project by Kevin Lynch.

This is all important work, but it is limited in important ways that leave me wondering if there isn't some way to expand the scope of the submission pool. For example,

research on urban public space tends to focus on behavior and interaction patterns as rather isolated phenomena, whereas I see no research represented among the awards that moves from this level to an analysis of the normative order of the public realm in a larger context of social and institutional structures.

I was initially surprised to find that the lists of awards included no representatives of the fairly substantial body of anthropological and sociological work on place, on material culture, on the sociology of technology, or on the relationship between community and place in different cultural and historical contexts. As I thought about it, however, I realized that I should not have been surprised. There is an understandable affinity of the designer for research that focuses on ways one can manipulate behavior and induce experiences by manipulating the environment—rather than research that focuses on (for example) the complexity and relative tenuousness of social relations in public settings, or the whole structure of social, political, and economic relations that lie behind the achievement of civility and comfort in public places. It's true that much of this kind of research goes beyond what designers can control. But perhaps designers should also learn to participate in processes that they can't expect to control, and to understand something about the logic and structure of place-making as a form of collective action—as a thing we do together, and not simply as a kind of design and engineering problem.

Places are both a product and a medium for human action. They are patterns of relationships, implying opportunities and constraints, and they are a kind of collective action—some of which are mediated by material things, some of which are a matter of spatially organized practices. Every design decision in the making of places is not only a technical response or a value proposition, but also a proposition regarding our relationships with nature and with one another, and a proposition that constitutes certain possible ways of materializing those relations. In a certain respect, we don't need research to tell us that design matters, because design is partly the way we *organize* our understanding of what matters and *transcribe* that understanding into built form. Each decision also implies a politics, even when it is grounded in technical knowledge that seems to obviate questions of power.

In this regard, research can be oriented to answering different kinds of questions in relation to the design of places: questions of technique (how to design doors that don't upset the calm of Alzheimer's patients, how to create public spaces that facilitate and don't obstruct social interaction); but also questions related to *process* (the relation of design to the social and communal relations in the

context of which it operates), and related to *purpose* (the appropriate ends as well as means in the design of different kinds of places, and how we can know).

For example, although I'm all in favor of face-to-face interaction, I'm often distressed by the unwarranted privilege given to the ideal of facilitating face-to-face interaction as the only form of social engagement to which design seems relevant. Part of what goes on in the design process is figuring out what is worth doing, what is worth inscribing in the relatively obdurate reality of a shared world, what is worth sharing (and, implicitly, what is to be discreetly obscured). Part of the process of the design of places ought to be a process of clarifying the questions that the designer can't and shouldn't answer for us. I don't see much recognition of the role that various kinds of social research might play in helping us arrive at such clarity.

One exception to the overall pattern in the research projects recognized is Steven Moore's book, *Technology and Place: Sustainable Architecture and the Blueprint Farm* (Austin: University of Texas, 2001), which was recognized for a 2002 award. Although this study looks at the rather specific case of the Blueprint Farm in Laredo, Texas, it represents the one example of research focused on key questions having to do with the embedding of the work of designers in a larger social process, drawing on recent work in the sociology of science and technology in order to illuminate the way techno-science is integrated into the heterogeneous collaboration entailed by a place-making project of this kind.

Another suggestive example is the study called "From Yard to Garden: Interventions in the Landscape of Play," by Susan Herrington and Kenneth Studtmann (1999). This study seems to suggest a somewhat different way of thinking about the way design accomplishes social goals. It focuses on the use of natural materials and the arrangement of a landscape that facilitates the self-structuring and creative spontaneity of preschool children's play, in that way contributing to the cognitive and social development of the children. Notice that the idea was to build a set of techniques that would give the landscape characteristics to make it good to move through, react to, think about, differentiate, and give meaning to as the physical infrastructure for a geography of play. It doesn't try to reflect the culture of the children as interpreted by the adult designers. Instead, it tries to understand the kids' play as process, as culture-producing work in itself, and to provide them with safe but eminently flexible material with which to work. The success of the design techniques is indicated by the way the kids themselves come to name different places within the playground, by the way it becomes a meaningful geography that

undergirds what sociologists have called the idioculture of the place (essentially, its idiosyncratic culture).

Some of what I see as the imbalance in the overall pattern of awards is clearly a reflection of an asymmetry between designers and researchers in the social sciences. Designers often know more about the relevant research than social scientists know about the qualities of physical form or the practices of design—even those social scientists ostensibly interested in issues of space and place. Researchers from different disciplines often come to the task of studying place with a generally impoverished grasp of the way built environments are formed, tending to see them as only aggregations of physical attributes rather than as particular forms and patterns with emergent properties, situated most immediately in the practices and technologies of design, planning and building. For this reason, I've been making the case to my colleagues that a sociology of place needs to incorporate a capacity for typological analysis of the material reality of both buildings and landscapes. They would make propositions more sufficiently context-sensitive and useful as contributions to design.

On this note, I think there may be something of a missed opportunity here. Much more could be done to get designers listening to the kinds of questions that researchers ask—as well as understanding the way they ask them, the way different kinds of inquiry are carried out, and the way different kinds of answers are validated. As Clare Cooper Marcus pointed out:

*Certainly, in the area of environmental design we need more discussion of what constitutes research. Is a commendable site or contextual analysis prior to design, research? Does a trip to the library to look up a few articles on parks prior to designing one, constitute research? Unfortunately, the semester-bounded studio-teaching of design rarely includes time for anything beyond relatively superficial fact-finding. While this is understandable in terms of primary focus of design-training, it does tend to leave some designers with a rather hazy idea of what research is, and hence what might be appropriate to submit for an award in place-based research (Places, 12:1, 1998, p.59).*

At the same time, there is much to be done to prepare researchers in the social sciences to pay attention to the kinds of understanding that only designers can have of the material with which they work, the conceptual and practical problems with which they wrestle, and the ways they go about resolving those problems. For some time, it has seemed to me that we need to work on creating new places for these collaborations to take place, since neither the constraints of typical projects undertaken for hire, nor the traditions and constraints of studio education, are necessarily ideal for this purpose.