

THE BORAL DESIGN AWARD 2010

text Tone Wheeler



Courtyard House, the winning scheme by Aidan Murphy and Aaron Peters.

Boral's Design Award competition proved to be a tough nut to crack for many entrants this year. Juror Tone Wheeler gives us his take on why so many of the submissions struggled with this complex, challenging and forward-looking brief.

Architects enter competitions for a wide number of reasons: a release from day-to-day travails; a test bed for ideas not found in commissioned work; indulging client-less design; a team bonding exercise; testing new presentation techniques; and not least the cachet and cash that a win brings.

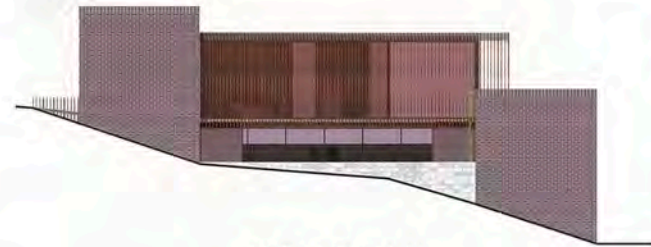
All of these could be seen in the 95 professional and 25 student entries to the Boral Design Award, described in the brief as a competition for "a detached residential dwelling on a compact site of the future... with a floor area of 125m²". Every entry required not only a plan and section for a resolved design, but also high quality 3D renders. As a result, a lot of energy and commitment went into the entries, and while much of it was outstanding, not all of it was well directed. It would seem that many entrants ventured headlong into

the process, fired up on the possibilities for unrestrained creativity, when a bit of restraint would have served them better.

The Sydney-born architect John Andrews, who won several big overseas competitions to kick-start a great career, once said that you should read the brief, read it again, and again, and then set it aside and start designing. For the judges it would appear that many contestants only listened to the last part of that advice. The nature of this competition has practicality at its root: it asks for a small house, flexible for a future extended family (yes, all in 125m²) on a steep and narrow awkward site, with street access at both ends. The competition brief has two starting points that exist in every architectural project: a purpose and a place. And it seeks a third 'P': the prototype, a design that



Courtyard House street elevation.



Lithe House by Whatever Studio.



Lithe House street elevation.

embodies both a response to the exigencies of the brief and site but also addresses some more universal ideas.

These definitive practical qualities, rather than some vague abstraction that lies at the heart of many 'ideas' competitions, are further amplified in the five judging criteria (right beside the list of prizes – ignore them at your peril). A couple were obvious: use Boral products and make sure the construction is viable. That should have been easy for everyone: Boral make stuff for almost every bit of current construction, and the judges will cut a good section some slack if not every junction is resolved. But there is a trap in 3D visualisation, with its emphasis on surface rather than structure, that many fell for. A complete absence of construction logic in a competition sponsored by a construction materials firm consigns the entry to the pile in the corner very early in the morning of a day's judging. There is only so much mullion-less glass that appears to support upper floors (in the absence of anything so mundane as a column), that you can look at before the second coffee kicks in.

The other three criteria are more crucial, but more subjective: design innovation, sustainability and adaptable/flexible spaces. What issue unites all three? Size. Big houses are much easier to design than small, so that's where the innovation will start, in getting more out of less. Sustainability is no longer about whacking green bling all over the box. It's more fundamental than that, but sadly the students were the slowest to avoid the gadget trap. Sustainability in architecture is now in two key areas: the footprint of the project and its ability to adapt to future changes, either in use or in technology. That future flexibility, the third criteria, was the one that was least addressed in the designs, although the quality of the rhetoric was often high (and in the entry from Michael Markham, both insightful and humorous). So it comes down to size and sustainability: getting the most out of the least in lots of different ways into the future.

On the basis of size alone the judges could exclude half the entries: many were just too big. Not that we got the ruler out – the obese ones were obvious at first glance and a second look would

discard those with too many rooms on far too many levels. But smallness didn't engender flexibility; indeed the major lacuna in even the best entries was a plan that the judges could really imagine being used in lots of different ways. Rooms still had rigid names, or more infuriatingly numbers, that indicated a dedicated use (dining/sleeping/garaging) rather than possibilities. Some, such as the second place winner, had diagrams that promised more than they delivered in the actual house. And some suggested flexibility through physical additions (and, incredibly, deletions – like that's going to happen), which might circumvent the size limitations, but only in a way that is against the spirit of the program.

So it would seem the 'purpose' part of the brief was undercooked, but what about 'place'? The fictitious site had certain odd characteristics, leading to some amusing contortions in form, not least a couple of towers, but the climate was implied: it could be anywhere you nominate. Sadly, from a sustainable point of view, most entries either didn't nominate the locale (so you assumed it was in the author's home town, which was sometimes at odds with the design) or they ignored climate as a form-maker altogether. We weren't looking for a NatHERS report – we just wanted the home to look like it would be comfortable in summer and winter. Confront the street by all means, but not the occupants. Speaking of which, who says cars, that have been the ruination of the streetscape in suburbia, are a vital feature in the future? Why not a flexible room on the street that could be a living room, flat, or home office that interacts with the passers by, and another room at the rear, which can store a car until such time as the residents see that it's better used as another room of the house (a flat for the third generation, or workshop or extra bedroom) with the small electric car on a share basis up the street.

And finally a word on presentation, which proves how astonishing rendering tools have become in the hands of most architects. Photographic realism sometimes tells you too much: just like magazine shots, the furniture seems too important and the people are a distraction from the architectural idea.

And maybe some just tell you all too quickly that it's all building and not too many ideas. The entries that reveal the thought process, through bite-sized text and simple but informative diagrams, always got a second look. Bigger ain't better.

So why the winners? The winning scheme by Aidan Murphy and Aaron Peters (Cox Rayner Architects/Kerry Hill Architects) is modest and delightful and the judges all wanted to move in. Perhaps not as flexible as we would like, and it dodged the car issue without really gaining a benefit on the street, but it packed just a little more punch than all the others. Second place, to the delightfully named Whatever Studio (let me guess, Gen Y?) had more rhetoric and a better diagram, but not a better house. The central courtyard has some clever ideas about adapting to the weather and use, but the harshness of the forms externally and some crudity in planning internally, let the winner through at the final post. The student winner is more conventional, but then so were all the student entries, which only reinforced the prejudice some of us held that the public's belief that youth has all the answers is misplaced, at least when it comes to architecture.

It's a tough and complex gig to make a small house, inward and outward looking, that can address a number of different functions, and serve as a prototype for future narrow allotments. No one quite nailed it, but it takes a full day of great entertainment and argument to get five opinionated judges to agree. The choices are ours jointly, but the report above is just one interpretation. **ar**

Tone Wheeler is an architect, author, educator and consultant with an abiding interest in environmental architecture and sustainable design. Tone founded the architectural practice Environa Studio 20 years ago and has designed individual and multiple housing projects, commercial buildings and urban design schemes, all with a strong emphasis on social and environmental concerns.