

WITHER THE GREEN AWARD?

Despite its relatively long history, every year the AIA's Sustainability Award attracts controversy and questions as to its relevance. Are we any closer to addressing its perceived problems, or is it time to let the award go?

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Architectural awards are perennially contentious. Every year 'the jury is wrong', 'the criteria is inappropriate' or 'wrongly interpreted', or 'the entries are the worst ever'. Recently, the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) awards have come under greater scrutiny: from within, as the National Council committee considers their overhaul; and from without, as apparent anomalies in the national awards become ever controversial. Why, for example, does the ACT have almost as many architectural awards as NSW with less than a tenth of the population? Why does Victoria only give full awards, ensuring they are eligible for a national award, while NSW gives commendations, meaning the buildings are not eligible nationally?

In this reconsideration, no award is more controversial than the Sustainability Award, introduced in the early 1990s. For some, the award was never legitimate: either every building should be 'sustainable', or it's unfair to single out one aspect of a building's design when it should be *the* core value in building design (particularly in the current zeitgeist), or simply one, minor consideration among innovation, aesthetics, narrative, composition and so on. For others, the award has simply run its course, important when green issues were rising to the fore, but now redundant given the belief that all buildings should be judged against green criteria. Then there are those who believe that there has never been a more important time for architects to show leadership on green issues: with both sides of the national government having a 'carbon tax' policy, relying heavily on energy savings in the built environment to achieve early

outcomes, and with increasing public concerns on the wider issues of building health and quality, the time is right to make the Sustainability Award the premier award, at least regarding the inevitable publicity following the ceremony.

Another issue is the proliferation in awards for sustainable green design: when the AIA launched the award in the mid-1990s, it virtually had the field to itself. Soon, the big industry bodies such as the HIA and MBA added green awards, and now every magazine or publisher has some form of green award (including the publishers of this magazine, Niche Media, as a component of their annual IDEA program). A few awards, such as The Francis Greenway Society's, have come and gone, but the total number is on the rise, so is it time for the originator of the green award to bail out?

Against this backdrop of differing views the RIAA National Environment Committee (NEnvC), as it was then, advocated in 2006 a change in approach. With a wider remit on sustainable issues than just an award, they sought to bring greater awareness of green issues in the profession, envisaging a four-step process. Firstly, there were a number of different awards (in NSW, for example, there was an 'Energy' award and an 'ESD' award) that could be combined under one banner: the Sustainable Architecture Award. The second step was to change the entry requirements so that there was no longer a separate category to be entered, but rather to open up eligibility for the award to all entrants in all categories. The third step was a requirement for all entrants to provide specific information on the sustainable characteristics of

their entry, along with the usual information provided upon entry. The fourth step was to abolish the 'Sustainable Architecture Award' at some stage in the future, when all building had reached green nirvana, a point I'll return to later.

By then, the AIA had a well-resolved 'Environment Policy'. Already 10 years old, it had been rigorously debated, was wide ranging (it included a detailed supplementary document on 'Design Strategies for Architects') and had been widely accepted by the 'green geeks'. Nevertheless, awareness of the document, and take up of it, was minimal outside the green inner circle. The 'Design Strategies for Architects' was the first document listed in the Environment Design Guide (EDG), a premium research document sponsored by the AIA as part of the then-BDP (Building Design Professions), now wholly owned by the AIA, and every strategy was referenced by one or more of the almost-300 articles within the EDG. But as there were only 300 subscribers from within the 10,000 AIA members and around 12,500 registered architects, this detailed knowledge was not widespread. Indeed, there was some concern amongst the EDG editorial committee (which included members of the AIA NSC) that very few of its 300-odd subscribers had even opened the huge, three-volume printed version of the EDG, and frustration that it had become a green talisman for the bookshelf. Even when it switched to a digital version, the fear remained that, as great a resource as it was, it wasn't known or used.

Against that backdrop, the intention of the second and third steps of the revised 'Sustainable

Architecture Award' was to increase awareness of sustainable issues among the profession, to emphasise that it applied to every building, and that by having to reference some green criteria, there would be a general increase in knowledge about green design issues. The green criteria would be those listed on the AIA's own website and within its most prestigious research document.

Only step one of the new strategy was adopted at that time, and later events overtook the implementation of the rest. The NEnvC became the NSC (National Sustainability Committee) and the 'Environment Policy' listed on the website was changed to the 'Sustainability Policy' and rewritten to a standard template that diluted some of the more specific policies, removing the 'Design Strategies for Architects' altogether.

Disquiet about the sustainability awards continued at every presentation evening, with juries, particularly in NSW, becoming alarmed at the 'second rate or second chance' nature of the award. Increasingly, it seemed that entries were long on 'green bling' and metrics, but short on good fundamental design for longevity and cost-effectiveness. The issue came to a head at the 2011 NSW awards, when jury chair, Genevieve Lilley, expressed such doubts in her remarks before the Milo Dunphy Award. However, changes are now underway that will prevent a repeat of the embarrassment that some felt on that evening.

The AIA National Council looks set to implement a good deal of the 2006 strategy, but with a very important twist: much of the emphasis on metrics and formulaic criteria has been replaced with an appeal to 'broader measures of long-term value, including adaptability, endurance and the significance of beauty ... the need to ensure an understanding of sustainability more holistically, including environmental, social and cultural dimensions ... the need to recognise the importance of integrated thinking not only at the individual building scale, but at the locality ... and urban scale.'

Significantly, this rejects the 'star' approach adopted in so many other awards, with its reliance on objective criteria (no matter how limited) in favour of wider-ranging but rather subjective criteria. 'How very architectural', some might say, a return to internal values, and yet it may well emphasise the very thing that architecture can do better than any other endeavour: to design for a better future rather than a standardised present. **ar**

Disclosure: The author is a member of the current AIA National Sustainability Committee, was chair for the early discussions and has been involved in recent decisions on the Sustainability Award. He has been on an (R)AIA jury as an ESD expert in 2002 and was the recipient of the NSW ESD Award in 2003.

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