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The EDRA/Places Awards 1998-2003

William L. Porter

It is apparent from a review of the first six years of this awards program that the joining of EDRA with *Places* has had wonderful effects. There is evidence of various kinds of convergence between researchers and designers, implying the evolution of a hybrid community—a group whose activities engage both research and design, who have strong competencies in both arenas, and whose professional identity includes both research and design. There has also been a distinct movement in the awards program toward greater depth of research, greater awareness of action implications of the research, and challenges to conventional ways of working in design and planning.

Some award winners join the domains of research and design so well they make old boundaries difficult to discern. But awarded projects in the category of "research" that do not seem immediately to address how the future might be shaped, nevertheless indulge the design imagination, creating a more useful foundation for future planning and design projects. And projects that have received awards in the "design" and "research" categories successfully incorporate research into the stream of professional practice.

One might ask how this is different from what designers and planners normally do when they look into a situation. And superficially, the projects may look the same. But beneath the surface are ideas that demonstrate important differences from conventional practice. All these ideas do not necessarily show up in every awarded project, but taken together, they suggest both important reforms of professional practice and strengthened commitment to the underlying values of American society. While evident in the earliest EDRA/*Places* awards, these ideas stand out in bold profile in the latest set.

Society and Environment

The social context of design has long been a concern of these awards. The distribution of power and wealth in our society forces attention, as well as resources, onto specific groups, leaving others less visible, or even invisible. Such bypassed groups are less able to participate in the shaping of the environment to their own purposes and ideals, and less able to enjoy the fruits of a careful understanding of their own heritage and history. Many of the people attracted to EDRA and *Places* have been committed to redressing this wrong. They believe underrepresented groups should be brought further into the vital processes of everyday life and the special provinces of understanding opened by the design and research disciplines. As one of these people, I believe the payoff of these activities cannot be overestimated. Such work allows sometimes invisible groups to achieve a greater sense of self, a stronger identity,

and a place in the larger schemata of society.

Enhancing the presence of underrepresented groups also expands environmental designers' and researchers' definitions of society, making them more inclusive and respectful of its immense diversity. By deepening our understanding of groups whose priorities have *not* influenced the shape and character of our environments, we discover new possibilities for the conception and design of places. The new perspective adds to our understanding of existing places and increases the richness with which society may become visible through changes to the form of its environment.

Concern for the natural environment has also been a hallmark of the EDRA/*Places* awards. And much the same reasoning surrounding the need to enhance the presence of bypassed social groups can be applied to parts of our environment that have been neglected or abused. While their status today may be symptomatic of past societal priorities, these priorities need not characterize, and should not limit, our vision of future environments. But understanding such environments in light of the interests they once served does provide an important prelude to understanding how those places can be made a richer part of our lives today.

In particular, in the U.S., even though such environments may once have been exploited for the benefit of narrow interest groups, they sometimes also served to bolster the larger economy. In the early stages of our growth as a nation, the consequences of exploitation, understandably, were neither understood nor paid for. But the EDRA/*Places* awards, reflecting the increased responsibilities of a more mature nation, seeks to revisit our democratic foundations, and take fuller account of the diversity of the people who comprise this society and who ought to reap its benefits.

A Question of Values

With such an exploration of diversity, different sets of values inevitably emerge to propel inquiry. One might argue that, at their origins, both EDRA and *Places* were dominated by the concerns of relatively small groups lying off the center of mainstream professions. But today the EDRA/*Places* awards demonstrate that these concerns did not then, and do not now, reflect a narrow set of values. Nor do they promote self-serving strategies to carve out new niches in the professional marketplace. Instead, they demonstrate real leadership in the quest to understand and express our society and its environment in all of its richness and variety. And they reflect a heightened sense of responsibility to ourselves, as ever more inclusively defined.

In the research conducted, within or outside the

framework of a design or planning project, this latest round of awards continues this sensitivity to a questioning of values.

In any particular project, whose values dominate? How do we know, or at least find out? What guarantees do we give to the user? Who controls the content and conduct of research?

These questions open up further paths of inquiry. Who are the legitimate stakeholders? What are their interests, and how do the consequences of the research bear on those interests? What aspects of a project may benefit the self-interest of the researchers as opposed to those under study? All of these questions are more apt to be addressed today than in projects of the past.

A Final Word

One of the most elusive issues for these awards has been that of the design quality of projects and, related to that, the creative contributions of gifted designers.

To their credit, the awards program juries to date have

respected both research and design, narrowly and broadly conceived, and they have recognized extraordinary projects that have not satisfied criteria of thorough and explicit reasoning from research-based findings to design expression.

Some jurors have argued that, for these awards, the connection between research and design should be made explicit. But should explicitness be up to the authors or to the jury? Do we care how Mondrian thought about his wonderful series of abstractions of the tree? Or is our care more properly directed toward how we think about it and how we can appreciate it more fully? Doesn't reasoning from research to design imply exactly the kind of linear thinking that may not be characteristic of great designers?

If responsible social and environmental action requires such reasoning, and if the achievement of extraordinary quality requires the mysterious integrative processing of talented designers, can the two be reconciled? The EDRA/*Places* awards program is an ideal venue in which to continue to address this question!

Informing Places

Mark Francis

Design is not research; research is not design. This was long the view of both professional designers and scholarly researchers. On the one hand, design is principally an intuitive process involving invention, creativity, and independent action. Research, on the other, requires reflection, systematic investigation, and analysis of data. The two activities exist across a divide between understanding and action, knowledge and invention, theory and practice, meaning and form.

Such positions were fundamentally challenged in the 1960s with the development of the new field of environmental psychology.[1] At that moment increased interest in socially and environmentally responsive design also led to increased interest in design methods, the development of postoccupancy evaluation (the radical idea of returning to a project to see if it works as intended), and the emergence of design research. For thirty-three years the Environmental Design Research Association has been a leader in advancing this point of view. More recently, it

has been joined by *Places*, now in its sixteenth year of publication. Today, there is also a large and active group of designers and researchers who work together to try to improve design practice through research. Encouraged by a growing and cohesive body of published work in books, journal articles, and conference proceedings, this group provides a counterpoint to trends in high-style and fashionable design.[2]

Ten years ago, a few of us gathered in the back of a small café in Montreal to discuss the prospect of a new awards program to celebrate the very best of research-based design and design-based research, and bring it to the attention of practitioners.[3] The idea was inspired in part from the demise of the *Progressive Architecture* Research Awards. But it also grew from the mutual desire of two different but like-minded groups (EDRA and *Places*) to explore how research could inform design, and design could inspire research. This intersection intrigued some of us who had worked for years to bridge the gap between