

...and the Winner is

You can be bloody minded and still win. This is exactly as it should be says Neil Parkyn



Architects love Awards. It's not so much getting a Big Hug from Mum or sliding the citation into an IKEA frame, but rather the triumphant end of a journey which began when the client-to-be sat in your lobby and clocked the wall of award certificates, like a general's chest full of medals. With luck, and a talented architect, you Mr Client could be up there as well.

But first you'll need to navigate the current plethora of available Awards. Not at all a simple matter of being up for the Stirling Prize or a RIBA Regional Award. The choice is as wide as the components of a building. Fancy the prize for Best-Use-of-a-Door-Closer-in-a-Public-Building? I'm serious, such is the fragmentation of the Awards 'system'; so-called 'Awards' based on the use of a specific product seldom take note of the overall excellence of the building in its context and its response to the client brief. Rather like Hollywood, you can get an Oscar for Door Closers, as for Hair Design.

You can also be deceived in assuming that the Big Boys on the architectural scene don't often win Awards. I was about to note the absence of Lords Foster and Rogers from the national Awards, but this simply isn't the case; they are often up there as well, alongside those bijou practices who design remarkable buildings without fuss or fame and tend to be well regarded by judges who are seeking Young Talent.

My own experience as a one-time judge for several of these Awards is that the panel – all volunteers – take their mission seriously. The list of candidate buildings is comprehensive and, in true Booker Prize fashion, much argued over. (You can even get odds from your friendly neighbourhood bookie). A day of visits is packed and intense, as well as stimulating and cheering to stand in front of and enter buildings of real quality. Funny how you can very rapidly get a feel for an Award candidate – comments from the clients, buzz from the classrooms, wonderful views

framed by the fenestration, even the details of a built-in cabinet. Yet come dusk, one is rather hoping for a tincture or two!

In this context it's worth referring to the Civic Trust Awards which I know first hand as being wider ranging than the usual crop of gongs. For starters, the Awards team always includes a staff member from the Local Planning Authority, who fills in the planning context as well as a Lay Assessor who offers invaluable



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able guidance of how the candidate building or public realm scheme had bedded down and was viewed by Joe Public. This all leads to a rounded discussion at the end of the day at which the overall quality of each scheme was assessed. In the end it was all down to me, but I felt more confident and decisive with this supporting background in place. I would be very sad to see these Awards come to an end. We would see no more of those distinctive triangular plaques on winning walls.

This spectrum is also covered by the RTPI's Awards for Planning Excellence, a long established scheme which rewards quality and initiative across the full spectre of planning activity. No one would doubt that such excellence deserves public and peer recognition.

For the architect there remains a telling ambiguity. While many an architectural Award winner falls neatly into a supportive planning context, others defy it with designs which challenge it. You can be bloody minded and still win. This is exactly as it should be. ■

Victor Ludorum
Not so Glittering Prizes
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