file - Awards AIA

How to help a design jury choose your project: The art of standing out in a crowd

(This article by John W. Ostrom, public relations coordinator for the California chapter of the AIA, first appeared in Architecture California *and is reprinted here with the permission of that magazine.)*

Every architect has built at least one award-winning project during his or her career — the only problem is getting others to recognize the outstanding design with an appropriate award. Despite the obvious quality of your project, it may go unrecognized by jury after jury, an oversight often attributed to a particular jury's bias. But the real reason may be the way you submit your work.

Award juries are required to screen scores, if not hundreds, of entries. In the initial screening, a submittal that doesn't explain itself clearly often is passed over without full consideration.

Architectural design awards programs generally ask for three types of information: written descriptions, plans and photographs. By using these media effectively, you can increase significantly your chances of being considered for an award.

Tell it like it is

Written descriptions are not always the first thing a jury evaluates, but what you say about the project can weigh heavily in a jury's decision. The project description is your chance to tell jurors what they *can't* see in the photographs and to explain more fully what is shown in plan. Juries are concerned about what the client's program is, how the design responds to the program and to the user, how the project addresses the environment and adapts to the site, and other considerations that went into the design.

Most project descriptions are drawn from marketing brochures, or read as if they were. Descriptions of features that are, or should be, obvious in photographs are of little help to a jury in deciding what constraints the architect was working under and how he or she responded. Often, an innovative or creative response to difficult design parameters can favorably influence a jury.

As an example, one project in a recent design awards program sponsored by the California Chapter of the AIA included only a single, cryptic sentence as the project description. On the basis of such incomplete background information, the jury was unable to determine if the project was new construction, a remodel or an addition. Although the project had many qualities that the jury admired, the lack of program information made it impossible to consider the project for an award.

Plans may be one of the most overlooked aspects of any submission. Many architects submit the fewest number of plans possible and often do not include important sections, elevations or site plans. Once a jury has seen the photographs and read the description, the plan often becomes the final factor in determining the merits of a project.

One jury, in evaluating a research center, spent quite some time looking at the plan to see if the circulation patterns really worked. Only two general floor plans were provided and the jury was unable to determine how the different programmatic areas worked together. In fact, several crucial areas glowingly described were not represented in plan. As a result, a potentially award-winning project was dropped from consideration.

One firm, which has received numerous awards over the years, often prepares drawings and plans specifically for design award competitions. Working drawings are not always the best representation of a project and clear drawings make it easier for a jury to see how the design elements work together. The best advice is to provide sufficient plans to explain the project fully to a jury, including a site plan, representative floor plans, and any important sections or elevations. As one juror for a recent awards program commented, "In some cases it would be helpful to have plans of a wall detail or other significant features of the project not shown in other standard plans."

Picture this

The final area of consideration is possibly the most important, and in many ways the most controversial, feature of any architectural awards program. Although awards programs are often criticized as "photo contests," photographs are still the most practical and immediate method of evaluating the architecture. Most jurors recognize the seductive appeal of photography and are able to distinguish outstanding photos from outstanding design, but poor quality photographs are the surest way to keep your project from being considered.

There is no question that architectural photographers are expensive, but the investment can be a wise one for you and your client. In addition to improving your image in awards programs, the availability of good quality photographs can make it easier to have your work published. As incredible as it may sound, every design award competition has projects submitted with photographs that are out of focus, badly exposed, and too grainy to be legible. Many firms rely on someone in the office to photograph their latest projects. Talented amateurs may be able to do the job in some cases, but photographs not only have to show the important elevations of the building and significant design features, they also capture the spirit of place that makes the architecture unique.

One architect tells the story of the difference photography made to his firm: "When the project was completed, we were so sure it was an award-winner that we didn't think we needed an architectural photographer to show how great it was. I went out and took photographs myself and we entered the project in several design competitions. After having the project turned down flat in competition after competition, I contacted a juror for one of the awards programs. I asked him why the project wasn't receiving any recognition. He told me that the photographs were so unclear that the jury couldn't really tell what the architecture looked like.

"We hired a photographer to reshoot the buildings. When the prints came back we entered the project again in some of the same programs we had participated in earlier, in addition to other competitions. The project has since won four top awards for design."

A final point on photographs: artistically contrived shots that look good in a photographer's portfolio are not the best way to show off *your* work. The shadow of a tree falling across the floor tells a jury nothing about your project and can distract more than enlighten.

*

The best advice in entering any awards program is "when in doubt, follow the instructions." In some particularly rigid programs, ignoring the instructions may get you disqualified even before judging begins. In most other cases, not providing the required information will hinder a jury's ability to understand what your work is all about.

Give your award-winning projects a chance. Tell the jury what they need to know about the requirements of the project, not how wonderful it looks. Show them the plans necessary to evaluate such things as circulation and relationships between different programmatic areas. And get the best photographs you can afford to show the building's design elements and reveal its relationship to the surrounding environment.

A national, regional or local architectural design award can be an important marketing tool that allows your project and your firm to gain recognition in the press and with the public. Be sure to give your work every chance to receive the honors it deserves.

— John W. Ostrom