

## Another view on awards

## Prefabrication perils

### Increasing public interest

The leader ('Awards, peer reviewed') in *arq* 3/4 sets out a view of the architectural awards process which, as far as the United Kingdom is concerned, I do not think is accurate.

The Booker Prize for literature is judged by other novelists and critics; the Nobel Prizes are judged by the recipients' peers and other objective commentators; the Turner Prize is substantially judged by other artists and critics. All suffer wide and vigorous criticism from the press for their selection and for the basis of choice.

However, none of this seems to demean the value of the awards but it generates lay interest in the professional activity involved and clearly benefits winners. This is good. Without increasing public interest none of the cultural professions will survive. It is lack of public interest which allows 'the family silver to be stolen', not awards or the way they are administered, which can never be utterly fair.

I have had long experience of award and competition juries and currently chair the Royal Institute of British Architects Award Group, which organizes the RIBA Annual Awards and the Stirling Prize. The non architect element of these judging juries is strong and over the years has been so successful that it is likely to be strengthened.

There is no question of architects issuing awards to each other without restraint.

What there is at the RIBA is a keen understanding of how important the awards are as a means of communication with the public. This is something which schools of architecture should impress upon

students. An astonishing number of young architects have passed through my office who were incapable of writing a simple and clear letter. Even when asked to articulate what they are proposing, simple language is distorted into incomprehensible arch-speak, which wouldn't buy them a bus ticket, let alone impress a potential client. And nobody designs and gets built anything without one of those.

I do not think that architects are worse than other professions in the way awards are bestowed on their members. They are probably more scrupulous and caring. Where they do fail abysmally is in the communication with, and promotion to, the public about the added value their work contributes to building projects and the cultural values these bring to the environment and quality of human life.

MICHAEL MANSER  
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### Course, source and force

Michael J. Louis's paper on prefabricated brick wall panels (*arq* 3/4) highlights a number of issues relevant to the drive for innovation which is beginning to gather pace in the UK construction industry at the moment.

The Government-commissioned Egan Report *Rethinking Construction* promotes prefabrication and the benefits of off-site construction to reduce defects and waste, shorten construction times and pass on these benefits to the customer. Prefabrication is in danger of being

promoted as 'a good thing' in its own right. The danger of this is that 'uncreative optimism' regarding the performance of prefabricated building assemblies will brush aside the need for careful consideration from first principles of novel designs and lead to a rash of avoidable building defects such as that described in this paper. In the section on 'Applying Lean Thinking in Construction', the Egan Report gives as one of its exemplars a company that has innovated by supplying 'prefabricated brick infill panels manufactured off-site'. Reading the paper I could not help wondering if the company that supplied the panels in this case were one and the same.

Ironically, the defects in the system described are well within existing knowledge. The Building Research Establishment has carried out and published numerous detailed studies on many of the postwar prefabricated building systems and it would be tragic if this body of knowledge was ignored. If there is a resurgence of the use of prefabrication of the building envelope, how will the mistakes of the past avoid being repeated? It must surely be by a thorough understanding of the principles for building (*arq* 2/1) coupled with the application of system specific rules based on experience and research.

The paper highlights the point that, as always, the timeless principles for building apply, and that the relevant rules for the system have to be carefully thought through and tested. Achieving continuity of performance – in particular exclusion of rainwater – in the face of separate lives is the

key problem to any prefabricated assembly. This leads one to question whether brickwork by its nature is a suitable product for prefabrication in this way. A brickwork panel detailed with face seals at its perimeter joints at the same time as requiring drainage of the inevitable water penetration through it is asking the impossible. As Louis rightly says, the seals against water are better achieved by geometrical means, as provided by mathematical tiles or their modern equivalent.

Exclusion of water, one of the first requirements of building, seems to have failed in this case. Louis credits the illustration of the forces driving water through gaps in the construction to the AAMA. In fact, this drawing comes from G. K. Garden's *Canadian Building Digest 40, Rain Penetration and its Control*, published in 1963, which is still one of the most concise and best summaries of the problem. In our book *Performance of Materials in Buildings*, Lyall Addleson and I tried to popularize the points made in this digest with the triplet 'course, source and force' – a route for water to take, supply of water at the start of the route, and a driving force. All three are needed for water penetration to occur: take away any one and the problem of exclusion is solved.

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### Little things of everyday Importance

I enjoyed being reminded by Brenda and Robert Vale of Edwin Gunn's minor masterpiece *Little Things That Matter* in your last issue (arq 3/4). His book had the same stimulating impact on me the first time I came across it. Hence, half a century later when I was editor of *The Architects' Journal (AJ)*, I suggested to Cecil Handisyde (or 'Handy' as he was affectionately known) that we should publish an updated version for our own time, with the additional opportunities offered by new materials and the extra constraints of more stringent planning and building regulation controls.

For week after week, six of us from all branches of the building industry, argued about the best way of detailing those parts of a building which, small in

themselves, are prone to failure. The result was a series in the *AJ*, ultimately published as a book, called *Everyday Details*.

While both *Little Things* and *Everyday Details* were aimed at the small practitioner, Gunn's book was the more personal view based on his years of practice, and this gave his work its own particular charm. Handy's book was the distillation of many experiences (including those of *AJ* readers) and while far more extensive in scope, was perhaps more earnest in intent and lacking Gunn's idiosyncratic style.

I sympathize with the Vales' concern about the continued de-skilling of the architect, but would argue that there is still a great deal of wit and humour in modern architecture. It would not be too hard to imagine, for example, Terry Farrell using an attached dovecote to conceal a ventilation pipe. Readers will no doubt tell me that Piers Gough already has.

Thank you for publishing such an enthusiastic tribute to Edwin Gunn. He belongs to a select but modest band of authors who have taught some of us a lot about the theory and practice of our trade in a most agreeable way. Another minor hero of mine is H. B. Cresswell, with his two splendid books: *The Honeywood File* and *The Honeywood Settlement*. I learnt much from them as a young practitioner and still re-read them purely for pleasure. My house is even called 'Honeywood'.

And as the architect of a recently completed stone 'loo' for our church (my architectural valediction), I would commend Charles Sale's perceptive little book *The Specialist*; a tract not normally read for its architectural insights, but full of psychological truths about one of our most basic functions.

LESLIE FAIRWEATHER  
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*Leslie Fairweather is, among other things, an authority on prison design. His book, Prison Architecture, is due to be published in July*

### Failing to communicate

One of the things that I had hoped for in the appearance of *arq* was that it would provide a forum for the intelligent discussion of design. Indeed some of the discussions have been interesting but others have been marred by the use of the

kind of special language that inhibits rather than facilitates communication in this subject. Thus, I found myself in sympathy with the leader ('Learning to communicate') in arq 3/3.

Ironically, the same issue contained a piece ('Working with tolerance' – pp.220–233) that was exasperatingly obscure in its use of language. While it may seem invidious to pick on one particular piece when others have been equally guilty, let me cite as an example such a passage that brought my reading of an article to an end. The authors informed us that something has 'an interior character that is served by but is not subservient to the principal container'. Of course, that is what we expect: that which serves is normally subservient to that which is served. The use of the word 'but' implies that we should expect the reverse. There are ways in which the sentence could be changed but each gives different meanings and I do not know which the authors intended.

There were a number of interesting ideas in the article, any one of which might have made for something of substance, but none of them was developed in sufficient detail for me to understand what was being said. Overall it lacks a coherent structure. Neither was the article helped by the illustrations. For example, talk of a context provided by existing lean-to sheds was illustrated with a picture in which I could see no lean-to sheds, although one prominent free-standing shed.

I am sorry if this criticism is upsetting to the authors who have taken the trouble to describe their work for us. Let them take comfort from the fact that I have read worse by some professional writers. Consider the following from an exhibition illustration, 'The window responds to the city and the city responds to the window'. I am quoting from memory but the nonsense has stuck in my mind. (A bottle of whisky to the first reader to identify the author of this nonsense.) Is it necessary to point out that while the first half of the sentence may be a valuable observation, the city, assuming we can ascribe feeling to it, can only remain indifferent to the window?

What is the solution to this? The problems presumably come from the fact that architects receive little training in writing. This is a skill

which, like all others, takes time and practice to develop and schools of architecture have to consider whether this is something they wish to pursue. If so it needs to be taken seriously within their curricula. But this would be a long-term remedy. In the short term it would be unreasonable to expect those practising architecture to take time to become competent writers in order to report their ideas and work: they are hardly likely to want to take classes. The short-term answer is surely for teachers of architecture to take an interest in the study and reporting of current architectural work and ideas, that is, to base their research on the questioning of architects about their ideas and the way these are realized in their designs. Thus, education and publication might both be improved by the same means.

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*arq has always welcomed submissions by teachers on the lines advocated by David Yeomans. See pp. 16–31 of this issue for an example by Charles Rattray and Graeme Hutton*

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The Editors reserve the right to  
shorten letters.

## As others see us

**Hoist with our own petard – again**  
*The following piece, published under the heading 'Telling us how it is' appeared in the Astragal column of The Architects' Journal for 9 September – and is reproduced here with the consent of the Editor:*

*Architectural Research Quarterly continues to thrive; the current issue includes a robust warning about the neglect of written communication skills in the profession which 'has come to haunt us' .... What can be done to improve matters? arq need look no further for advice than my old friend Stephen Greenberg, who offers this thought in the self-same issue: 'My own belief is that we now have to confront and interpret heterogeneous texts, particularly in popular rather than esoteric culture. Only through a systematic and programmatic understanding of these can we posit a critical re-appropriation of the modern project'. Sorted!*

*The offending passage can be found in arq 3/3 in the Insight feature 'No city called Libeskind', pp. 288–290*

## Further details

**Alvar Aalto: Villa Mairea 1938–1939**  
*Readers of Trevor Dannatt's enthusiastic review in arq 3/4 may be interested to know that this book is available direct from Finland as follows:*

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