THE GREAT INDOORS AWARD 2007

Let's Push the Envelope

Notes on The Great Indoors Award 2007 jury deliberations.

The design of interiors is an underrated discipline: did that rather strange statement really appear in Frame magazine? The trouble begins with the name of a profession that apparently has no name. Some call it 'interior design', a sort of umbrella term that would seem to include the design of furniture, lamps, flooring and so forth. Interior designers do more than assemble a collection of objects: they use products and materials as tools to craft the particular space they have in mind. Others refer to 'interior architecture', a term that elicits images of well-designed rooms with nothing in them. Interior architects do more than design rooms: they open up rooms, connect them to surrounding spaces and make interiors suitable for human use, while quite often creating intense experiences and building three-dimensional identities for clients looking to underline their public images.

All that's a rather romantic reflection of the skills and potential of an interior designer. When you look at the day-to-day grind, however, this is somebody with a hard row to hoe – a person who lacks the status of a product designer or an architect. The star power of the former lies in the iconic value of designs for functional objects, which appear ad nauseam in every branch of the media. Design is sexy, and more and more product designers are strutting around like pop stars. One result is that an increasing number of them are being asked to take a crack at interior design – to create three-dimensional contexts for their own products. Hoping for an equally iconic environment, the client totally ignores the fact that a good interior is more than an aggregate of good-looking furniture, lamps and accessories.

At the other end of the spectrum is the architect, another professional with status to burn, thanks to the design and erection of eye-popping structures with the power to put entire cities on the map. Maintaining that status is a matter of realizing one cool colossus after another. The

result is a proliferation of iconic buildings. Even more important, the contemporary architect's influence is quite often limited to the building's exterior. The façade has to be an eloquent image that grabs the viewer's attention. Considered less significant and allotted a modest budget, the interior – its design and its furnishing – is treated to a corporate once-over more or less aimed at the anonymous occupant. Not so long ago, the architect was given carte blanche to design the inside of the building as well, to combine the shell and its contents in a harmonious entity. Today the interior has become somebody else's job, and an architect's knowledge and expertise in this area are rapidly disappearing.

While evaluating projects submitted to The Great Indoors Award, the jury clearly felt the consequences of this state of affairs. – designs in which exterior and interior merge to form a compatible whole – were few and far between, as were interiors that make a powerful statement about interior design as a discipline. The situation prompted the jury to look for projects that push the envelope, that attempt to cross frontiers and that, as inspiring examples, deserve to be remembered.

The jury found two projects whose interior and exterior form a coherent whole: a shop-cum-promotional display for a winery in Spain, designed by architect Zaha Hadid, and a seaside pavilion in England, produced by multifaceted designer Thomas Heatherwick. In pinpointing these two buildings – perhaps better described as 'pavilions' – jury members discussed the appropriateness of labelling the projects as interior design: are they not actually works of architecture? The final decision was that the iconic exteriors of both structures have given rise to interiors that are undeniably related to their shells but also striking in their own right. Selecting these two designs is the jury's way of emphasizing the importance of projects in which exterior and interior are seen as equal parts of one task, preferably to be realized by a single designer or design firm.

The same cannot be said of the other two projects chosen for an award. The Bernhard Willhelm flagship store in Shibuya (Tokyo) – an exuberant interior by design collective item idem – is located in a department store. An even more unlikely candidate for a prize was Jin's Global Standard, an eyewear shop in Nagareyama (Tokyo) designed by architect Ryuji Nakamura. This store is in a shopping mall, seldom the location of innovative retail concepts. In the case of both shops, their interiors illustrate a refusal to acknowledge the existence of the immediate surroundings. It's a refusal that the two design teams packaged in decidedly distinctive yet completely convincing ways. Inspired by Bernhard Willhelm's fashion brand, item idem laid siege to the conventions of high-fashion retail outlets. Nakamura ignored the ironclad rules of a shopping mall to create a strongly conceptual yet extremely customer-friendly interior. Retail reigns at The Great Indoors Award of 2007. Even the prize for Inte-

rior Design Firm of the Year goes to an outfit whose name is synonymous with retail projects. The trademark of Wonderwall, founded by designer Masamichi Katayama, is the sometimes hilarious fusion of polished decadence and bizarre humour. Luxury, a must in hardcore retail, radiates from the abundance of details and the degree of perfection that this firm pours into its projects.

As the jury reviewed each competition entry, retail design incontestably claimed the emperor's crown. Somewhat concerned, the jury was dubious about showing support for the dominance of commercial designs. Doubts dissolved, however, with the recollection of the jury's slogan for this competition: Let's Push the Envelope. And although retail does indeed represent the main activity of most of the prizewinners, the artistic value of their work is above reproach. Realizing this fact, the jury concluded that innovation is alive and well in the commercial arena. In a consumer's world, money is the driving force. Talent is used where it pays off. Retail clients obviously understand the power of design and don't mind spending money that leads to even more money.

Another noteworthy conclusion to be drawn from the work of these five prizewinners is that exceptional interior design currently occupies a fertile no-man's-land that feeds on architecture, product design, art and fashion. The designers behind the prizewinning projects pick and choose from the entire range of creative disciplines and use what they've found to create highly communicative images. Profiles of these designers reveal backgrounds steeped in various disciplines. Among them is not one that can claim exclusive rights to interior design. And let's not forget that three of the five awards go to Japan – evidently a place where talent and money merge and thrive.

The jury hopes its selections will inspire interior designers to wander off the beaten track and to explore the boundaries of their profession. The jury also wants the awards to be a signal to clients – particularly those in the cultural, corporate and public sectors – to make interior design as important as architecture, art and product design. They can start by providing talented designers with an ambitious brief, a sufficient budget and a reasonable period of time, thus making certain that the interior in question meets the demands and desires of their stakeholders, furnishes them with a powerful public image and remains in good condition far into the future.

Above all else, jury and organizers of The Great Indoors Award want to elevate interior design to the level of a 'mature discipline'. To give the profession of interior design the status and position it deserves. An unambiguous name would be nice, too.

Robert Thiemann
Secretary for the International Jury

Evaluating the Projects

The initial intention of The Great Indoors Award was to have a nominating committee review all entries to the competition before submitting the best five projects in each of five categories to a professional jury, which was to make the final selection: a total of five first prizes, one in each category. The organizers of The Great Indoors Award named and described the five categories, which they felt covered a broad spectrum of design, from commercial and cultural projects to office schemes and interiors for service providers. It was a plan conceived to lend clarity to all aspects of the competition. The categories were Show & Sell (retail), Relax & Consume (leisure), Concentrate & Collaborate (work), Serve & Facilitate (public) and Interior Design Firm of the Year.

The first phase of the plan was partially realized: a Dutch nominating committee of clients, designers and media professionals reviewed a total of 275 entries from 31 countries and selected 23 projects for further evaluation: 23, not 25, which proved to be an omen. The nominating committee found it difficult to limit its selection to five retail and leisure projects: entries to these two categories totalled 113 and 83, respectively, and the overall quality was excellent. In the remaining categories, with fewer entries and a greater difference in quality among the various projects, selecting the better projects was easier.

Members of the jury – which took over where the nominating committee left off – immediately felt restricted in their choices. Not only would they have liked to have had the opportunity to evaluate all 275 entries; they also had a problem with the great discrepancy in quality among projects in the various categories. Choosing only one winner was particularly hard in the two commercial categories, whereas they found not even one project worthy of a prize in the categories aimed at interior design for offices and service providers.

What followed was period of deliberation between jury and organizers. There was no lack of motivation on the part of the jury, whose members were eager to elevate interior design to a higher level and to stir up debate to achieve that end. They summarized their objective in a slogan: Let's Push the Envelope. Prizewinning projects had to show a pioneering spirit – to explore new territory – and, in so doing, to demonstrate to other designers and clients the power and possibilities of interior design. These were goals that mirrored those of the organizers, who subsequently proposed a change in the rules of the competition: the jury was asked to select five prizewinners from the nominees, without regard for categories. The outcome of this decision was that no prizes were awarded to nominees in the categories Concentrate & Collaborate and Serve & Facilitate. The projects that did win awards, however, received the jury's unanimous vote. Both jury and organizers believe that taking this approach was the correct and only way to honour the five most progressive, most innovative and qualitatively best of the 275 entries to The Great Indoors Award 2007.

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