

The power of awards



**Lynda
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ON ASSESSMENT

THE NEW ZEALAND architectural community is well served by many high-quality awards programmes, ranging from the Institute's body of awards programmes,¹ and other institute providers,² through to those created by industry suppliers³ and non-profit community organisations.⁴

Maintaining the excellence and continued relevance of such awards programmes relies not only on adequate funding but, also, on the constant assessment of how such awards serve the community – of what is being awarded, why and by whom. It can be observed, for example, how, over several decades, the structuring of the NZIA Awards has been tweaked – with new award categories introduced, the revision of existing structures, and the selection process for both judging work and jury selection continually being reconsidered.⁵

In the pursuit of architectural excellence, it is important to celebrate the contribution that good buildings make to the communities that use them. In addition, awards are important because, alongside publication, they contribute to the ever-developing canon of New

Zealand architecture. I would argue that this continual addition to our architectural history is the more important role of any awards programme and, for this reason, the aforementioned constant analysis of what/who we are rewarding is essential.

Such assessments attempt to address the lingering and consistent criticisms of awards for architecture, which include the over-abundance of annual awards programmes, a reliance on the image,⁶ supporting the status quo at the sacrifice of radical or dissenting ideas, and concern over who they leave out.

Awards can be seen as supporting expensive work that prioritises aesthetic consumerism at the expense of quality design in the lower-cost spectrum of projects. Awards evenings can become an endless party, celebrating the continuous cycle of well-photographed buildings for corporations and rich clients: arguably not the best way to present the value of architecture to the public.

Another criticism is that some awarded buildings do not serve their users well or contribute to their contexts after the test of time. There has been a suggestion by The Architecture Lobby (USA)⁷ that, perhaps, awards should be considered after the building has been in use for a decade. By then, the true contribution to the built environment will be understood, the aesthetic and design value will have survived, the response of the building users and community is easily measured, and the seduction of the shiny new factor will have dimmed.

Addressing who is left out of awards is an ongoing process – and it is important to be mindful of why some excellent buildings, and their architects, are left out of

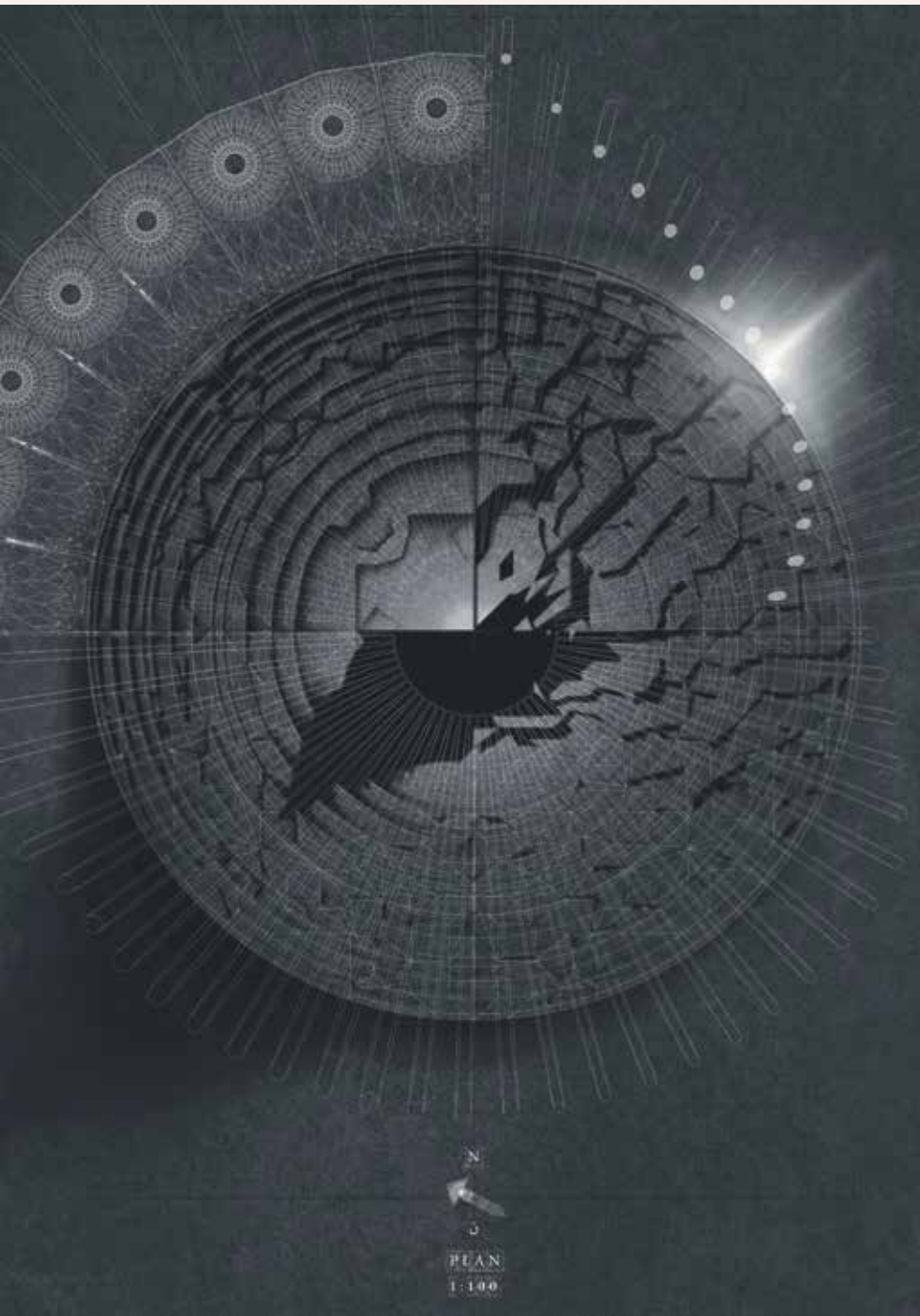
our written canon when reviewing history. There are many complex reasons for the absence of so many – which can include factors such as the non-submission of work (and why that might be), the structuring of awards programmes, mistakes in recording processes, lack of team acknowledgement, the particular biases of each jury and any undervaluing of non-mainstream design.

The lack of diversity on stage at any architectural awards event is common, proving that, while the existing (mostly excellent) systems serve many well, whole groups of people working in architecture are still unseen to the profession. One example is given in a recent article for *Block*, where Dr Andrew Barrie pointed out how the contribution by academics to the profession is generally excluded and called for recognition within the NZIA Awards programme, which largely establishes the canon.⁸

Gender is another obvious area, hopefully addressed by the establishment of the triennial A+W·NZ Dulux Awards in 2014. The acknowledgement of academia and other areas of diversity is built into these awards, which are designed to create a supplementary (rather than alternative) system that shifts the attitude, the method and the outcome of what is measured and who is rewarded.⁹

High-quality awards programmes also offer the community an opportunity to reflect on our current architectural culture and what is valued. Awards are the ground on which to negotiate the emerging thoughts of the profession and they can be reframed and shaped according to current concerns. It is clear, for example, that current

Portrait illustration by Julia Gessler.

**LEFT**

Mustafa Mora, plan - from *The 5-thousand-year line*, (2017), MArch (Prof) thesis.

Mora's thesis project considered a building that acts as an open public space for the sharing of ideas – a kind of cross between a university, a library and a plaza. The aim was to provide a forum for the community that prioritises debate, intellectualism and humanity. The project drew from the extraordinary beauty of the work of the Ma'dan (Marsh Arabs) in Iraq and used rigorous drawing processes to develop a unique, crystallised building outcome.

Mora's project was a finalist in the 2017 NZIA Student Awards.

REFERENCES

- ¹ NZIA Local and National Awards, Gold Medal, Named Awards, President's Awards and the NZIA Student Awards: all are held annually.
- ² DINZ Best Awards, ADNZ Design Awards.
- ³ AGM Interior Awards, NZ Wood Timber Design Awards, Resene Total Colour Awards, Dulux Colour Awards (New Zealand and Australia).
- ⁴ AAA Visionary Awards, A+W·NZ Dulux Awards.
- ⁵ Previous NZIA award categories included the Architecture Medal, Regional Awards, and Gold, Silver and Bronze Medals.
- ⁶ Mitigated, for example, by having juries visit the buildings and meet architects to discuss process and practice management, as done by the NZIA Award juries.
- ⁷ architecture-lobby.org – The Architecture Lobby was founded in 2013 by Dr Peggy Deamer, professor emerita of Architecture at Yale University, principal of Deamer Studio and current professional teaching fellow at the University of Auckland.
- ⁸ A. Barrie, 'Crashing the Party', *Block*, NZIA broadsheet, 7 October 2018
- ⁹ For a full description of the A+W·NZ Dulux Awards triennial programme, see architecturewomen.org.nz/archives/parlour-article-aw-dulux-awards-lynda-simmons
- ¹⁰ W. Mihaly, 'Redefining the Metrics of Success', 9 September 2019, archiparlour.org/redefining-the-metrics-of-success

graduates and young architects value the environment, identity and well-being, and how architecture relates to or impacts these. An example of a recent turn in public opinion is the strong positive response to the call by London-based activist Adam Nathaniel Furman for practices that use unpaid labour to be barred from entering awards.¹⁰

When it comes to laying down our canon, whose lens are we looking

through? The lens shifts with each generation and the need for constant re-assessment can be managed through the tweaking and design of awards programmes. I often ask the students I work with if they can see themselves in New Zealand's architectural history, whether in terms of the architecture produced, the architectural field they want to work in, or in mentors they can relate to. Often, they cannot, due possibly to the

absence of so many from awards (and publication) over the years.

Wonderfully, histories are not static and those erased can be made visible again. Stories are told and retold, and the power of awards programmes is that they are a part of this process. My advice to students is to enter as many as they can as they will be creating an emerging canon: one which will begin to look very different from the existing one. **❶**