Awards and Competitions.
What They Can Do
and How They Can Do It

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Introduction

In the 1980's, design awards and competitions became numerous enough to become serious vehicles for bringing good design to public attention. This was a welcome development and had great potential for raising the prestige of the design professions and making design thinking more visible to leaders in government and industry. Through the late 1980's and early 1990's design achievements continued to be frequently in the news.

By the end of the 1990's, however, with the vagaries of the business cycle, many of the organizations sponsoring awards and competitions were in serious financial difficulties, along with their corporate backers; many even disappeared. Now, in 2005, there appears to be a renaissance and even greater interest in rewarding design achievement. Schools and professionals alike are being challenged to produce works worthy of public recognition.

The Institute of Design began entering competitions in 1979, primarily as a way to obtain outside criticism of students' work. The premise was that if students were doing as well as believed by the faculty, they ought to be similarly judged by outside critics—outsiders always more credible than insiders. Whether through luck or virtue, the school's first ventures were highly successful, and we were encouraged to continue.

Institute of Design policy was to encourage students as long as a competition had integrity and did not interfere with educational objectives. Most entries were of work done as Bachelor of Science theses, already underway when the competitions turned up. Some entries were team projects done in class when a topic was appropriate, and some were simply the results of class work on general subjects that turned out to be related to the competition topic.

Between 1979 and 1993, when the first version of this paper was written, 253 Institute of Design students had won awards of one kind or another in 56 regional, national and international competitions. Eighty-three students had been honored with Grand, First-Place, Best-in-Category or other highest-level prizes. Since 1993, there have been fewer competitions, and with the Institute of Design's reorganization as a program of graduate level education only, there have been fewer opportunities to enter competi-

tions, Nevertheless, design awards have continued to be received.

All this is to say that over the years as a faculty member, I have witnessed many competitions. I have also served on international juries, consulted professionally on the creation of competitions, and thought about how awards and competitions are organized and judged. Because they do raise public awareness, and because they again seem to be obtaining access to the media and opinion leaders, I think it may be worthwhile to bring forward some of the problems that ought to be on the minds of organizers and jurors—for the good of the design professions and disciplines. For even greater good, it also may be time to think about how design excellence and the capabilities of design thinking might be more permanently fixed in the public consciousness.

Anatomy

For perspective, let's first look at the nature of these kinds of recognition. There are several things to consider.

Form

Recognition usually takes the form of an award for achievement or a prize for winning a competition.

Awards, in the purist form, recognize achievement that meets standards set in a category. The achievement, frequently over a long period, is usually not the result of seeking the award. Awards, however, may indirectly stimulate such achievement, as the Nobel Prizes have stimulated young students to follow careers in science and literature, and as the Malcolm Baldrige Award has stimulated manufacturers to strive for improved quality in their products. Increasingly, the media have involved themselves in award programs. ID Magazine and Business Week are two that directly recognize design achievement annually, and Popular Science often includes good design in its annual recognition of "the best of science and technology for the year". Nominations for awards are usually (but not always) made by recommenders other than the nominees.

Competitions usually set thematic challenges and seek out works produced in direct response to them. Entrants select themselves within the

rules of eligibility as defined by the competition organizers. Awards work best to encourage excellence by singling out exemplifying achievements by individuals or organizations. Competitions work best when the objective is to bring new thinking to a topic.

Theme

Themes vary from the highly abstract to the exceedingly specific, and interpretations of them by juries can be very broad or very narrow.

Themes for awards are more likely to be categorical than thematic. The Nobel Prize for Chemistry honors outstanding work in chemistry—as opposed to similar achievement in categories for physics, medicine or literature. The Pritzker Prize for Architecture honors architects.

Themes for competitions take a much wider variety of form. In abstraction, they vary from what must certainly be the most abstract themes—the Japan Design Foundation's single characters or words (e.g., "shu" [gathering], "water", "fire", "air")—to such highly specific themes as Sony's 1991 theme, "Audio Life Style", with its requirements for home operation and the inclusion of a CD player.

No matter how abstract or specific the statement, the interpretation can be broadly or narrowly made. The Japan Design Foundation allows its jurors to make broad interpretations of abstract themes; Forma Finlandia asked its jurors to judge entries much more narrowly for a moderately broad theme ("tomorrow's challengers"), favoring products producible with today's technology.

Reward

Rewards may be symbolic, monetary or both. Without doubt, the most famous combination of both is the family of Nobel Prizes. Symbolically, winning a Nobel prize guarantees prestige, admiration—even adulation—for life. Monetarily, Nobel prizes now are over the $1 million level because of the investment since 1896 of the original Alfred Nobel endowment. This is a magnificent reward today, but it had even more impact when it was first awarded in 1901—it was then thirty times a professor's salary!

Awards need have no monetary reward to be highly regarded. But when the monetary reward is insignificant or nonexistent, the institution making the award must have great prestige to as-

sociate value to the award. When the UN or a country's President presents an Award of Achievement, no one asks whether there is also a monetary award. Other institutions are much more dependent on the generosity of a reward to capture the public imagination.

Competitions, in contrast, depend on monetary rewards to attract entrants—unless they have carefully constructed a prestige image or achieved prestige status through staying power over the years. The Braun competition in Germany and the Mainichi Competition in Japan achieved reputations over decades that brought them high-quality entries without excessive concern for monetary reward.

It is hard to be precise about what is high or low for competition prizes. In the 1980's, a high value for a Grand Prize was within the range of $50,000 to $90,000 (the 10,000,000 yen Grand Prize for the Japan Design Foundation's International Competition in 1987 was worth $87,000). Today, the INDEX: Awards have five categories, each offering a prize of 100,000 euros—approximately $132,000 at the time of this writing. Low values are harder to fix, but some of the better-known international and U.S. competitions have offered First or Grand Prizes of $5,000 to $20,000 for narrowly specified themes.

Scale

Awards and competitions range in scale from local to regional, national and international.

Local awards are infrequently made. When they are, they are usually given by local chapters or member organizations of larger national and international organizations (IDSA Regional Student Awards, for example). National and international awards are almost always made by institutions or governmental organizations. Companies may sponsor local awards independently, but usually prefer to work with organizations, even at the local level. The INDEX: Awards, sponsored by the Danish government and a number of companies and institutions, are now the most significant of the international awards.

Competitions are similarly distributed in scale, with smaller-scale competitions more likely to be created for students. The step from national to international is significant, and most organizations and companies attempt it only after national experience. Several company-sponsored competitions (which, in contrast to awards, make

up the great majority of all competitions) have grown from national to international; the Sony, Philips, Braun and GE Plastics competitions are or were examples.

With larger scale comes greater responsibility. Participants and public expect more of national and international awards and competitions. Failure to treat procedures, rewards, ceremonies and public relations with the respect expected is damaging to the sponsoring organizations and the professions or disciplines represented.

Eligibility

Eligibility is normally defined by restriction or, for multiple prizes, restrictions within categories. For both awards and competitions, the approach is similar.

Typical qualifications for restriction are: discipline (e.g., architecture, industrial design), experience (student, professional), target organizations (preselected schools, industries), geographic location (state, country, region, world), level of realization (concept, manufactured product), affiliation (individual, company). Difficulties most often arise when eligibility restrictions are loosened either unknowingly or deliberately. The Japan Design Foundation deliberately sets no restrictions, but then carefully manages the judging process to make the evaluations as fair as possible. Others have created problems for themselves by allowing entrants with unequal qualifications to compete without appropriate evaluation safeguards.

Timing

The time between repetitions of an award or competition varies from one year to virtually any period with symbolic value. Most cycles are annual or biennial. A few, for example, the Braun Competition's, are triennial, and the INDEX: Awards are on a five-year cycle. Truly major competitions—such as the Olympics and popular international affairs that require elaborate preparations—are often staged on four year cycles. Special awards may be made at historical intervals marking a decade, centennial, sesquicentennial, bicentennial, etc., but these are usually one-of-a-kind occasions.

Announcements and submission dates for nominations or entries should respect both the dates of presentation and the schedules of expected entrants. Most presentations are either in the spring or fall to take advantage of nice weather (or to avoid vacation time and bad weather). Schedules to be respected are periods of business intensity and doldrums for companies (for example, Christmas/New Year and summer) and teaching cycles for schools (vacations and semester or quarter beginnings and endings). For organizations in the southern hemisphere, scheduling is additionally confounded with the differences in seasons between north and south.

Judging

Whether the process is visible to outsiders or not, most judging is done in stages. Unless there are only a few contestants (as may be in the case of nominees for an award) the sheer difficulty of evaluation requires multiple judging passes to reveal the highly qualified candidates. Some competitions externalize the process (Korea's GoldStar, the Japan Design Foundation and the Braun competitions, for example), requiring entrants to compete first in a preliminary, purposely simplified competition that separates the weak and strong competitors. Such a preliminary competition is usually judged by local jurors from the sponsoring organization. The subsequent competition of strong finalists is both more manageable for evaluation and more productive.

In most cases, nationally or internationally noted jurors are assembled on-site for the final evaluation. The process of judging may be conducted in a day, or may take several days for awards or competitions with many submissions.

Unless there are only a few candidates, final judging is conducted in two or more rounds, quickly eliminating the obviously deficient entries in the first round and concentrating more and more time on serious contenders in later rounds. A small number of final candidates are subjected to intensive examination and discussion before final decisions are made.

Communication

A major objective of all awards and competitions is dissemination of the news. Even when there are objectives other than advancement of the cause for which the prizes are given, focusing public attention on the organization, discipline and topic is of prime importance.

Purposes of communication differ. The Mainichi Competition was created to encourage Japanese designers and design students; its targets were the Japanese public, industry and schools. On a larger scale, the Japan Design Foundation

has the same targets, but its purpose is to increase awareness of the value of good design as a key to Japanese economic success on an international scale. In both cases, Japan is the communication focus; communications outside Japan are substantially fewer than those within. In other cases, intended audiences may be broader or even narrower. The Forma Finlandia and GE Plastics competitions both concentrated narrowly on new ideas for plastics fabricators, but also worked broadly to help fabricators by communicating the potentials of plastic to the general public.

Problems and Recommendations

Problems occur in spite of the best intentions. All of the following have occurred in the conduct of national or international awards and competitions.

Theme vs. Reward
Moderate themes should command moderate rewards; grand themes should command grand awards. Good taste should lead organizers to scale prizes to the kind of theme they are interested in. The issue here is appropriateness. It is noticeably inappropriate to award large sums for achievements of only local or specialized significance. It is less inappropriate, but more embarrassing, to award small sums to achievements of broad scope and general significance.
  • *Recommendation:* Match reward level to theme level; large rewards for broad themes exhorting vision; smaller rewards for narrower themes recognizing or seeking specialized achievements.

Lead Time
Deciding to enter a competition requires decisions about the use of time. Few serious entries are produced on short notice. Potential entrants must be notified well in advance if they are to produce original work; otherwise, entries of quality can only be works created for some other purpose.
  • *Recommendation:* Notify potential competition entrants at least six months in advance of the entry submission date. If students are to be eligible, set entry submission dates at the end of school terms (December/January and June/July).

Mixed Eligibility
If professionals and non-professionals (or students) are to be judged together, either because award candidates are allowed to nominate themselves or because a competition is open to both professionals and non-professionals, it may be very hard for jurors to disregard the authority that automatically accrues to the professional. That authority is also virtually impossible to disguise in a product already produced.
  • *Recommendation:* Require all entry materials to be anonymous—or categorize prizes separately for professionals and others.

Juror Integrity
Jurors must not have any opportunity for favoritism. Particularly in competitions, it is possible for jurors to be placed in the position of judging the work of their own students or associates. Rightly or wrongly, when this happens—and the entries win—their achievement and the entire process are compromised.
  • *Recommendation:* Require jurors to be free of association with any entry or to disqualify themselves from considering nominations with whom they have an association.

Responsible Judging
Jurors need time to judge. Depending on the subject, it may be possible to look quickly or it may be necessary to read carefully. It may even be necessary to obtain expert opinion. Quick-impact posters are designed for fast evaluation; complex communications, products, environments and systems require time to be understood; research projects must be studied.
  • *Recommendation:* Allocate evaluation time realistically. If explanatory materials should be part of the entry, encourage entrants or candidates to produce them—and allow them to be long enough to be adequately thorough. Distribute them to the jury, if necessary, before the convocation.

Expectation Matching
Specialized awards and competitions should reward specialized visions. Grand awards and competitions should reward grand visions. One of the worst mistakes a jury can make is to fail the expectations raised by the scale and scope of the award or competition. Mismatching an expectation for a visionary prize-winner with a choice of a nice, but small idea is a very serious mistake.

Choice of a broad and visionary concept in a situation where a more tightly focused effort is expected is almost as bad.

• *Recommendation:* Make it clear from the beginning to entrants and judges alike what the scale and scope of the award/competition demand as expectations. Where broad elegibility of entries is allowed, this may necessitate categories, but the breadth of interpretation and height of the goals expressed in a winning entry must meet the expectations set by the event.

Decision Criteria

Many criteria are used in judging. In the end, several candidates frequently are in contention, all of whom substantially meet the basic criteria. Failure to think beyond the basics at this stage may lead the jury to miss the choice best for the general good of the organization and the field— as it will be regarded by fellow practitioners and the public.

• *Recommendation:* Conduct final judging (1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.) with final criteria. For the good of the design professions and disciplines, reward vision and societal value in final choices.

Toward Design Recognition at a Societal Level

As awards go, the Nobel Prizes unquestionably do the job best. Through their values, prestige and monetary reward, they play an extraordinarily powerful role in shaping programs of work, careers and even lives. Particularly in the science community they do this well, bringing the young to science, and fueling scientific advance.

In a world that now needs thoughtful design as much as the world of the early 20th century needed science, it is time to construct a parallel system of awards for design. The goals are much the same: bring the best young minds to the design fields; encourage the best that design can do for industry and society.

Like the Nobel Prizes, the awards should be to individuals, should be international, should recognize separate categories of design, should have substantial monetary reward and should be permanently established through an institution committed to international excellence in design research, education and practice. Unlike the Nobel Prizes, the awards need not be annual if appropriate funding for them at that frequency is unattainable.

From Nobel's estate, which created the Nobel Institute, 1,000,000 Swedish crowns, worth approximately $270,000 in 1900 turn-of-the-century dollars, were set aside for the actual awards. From this, five prizes of 150,000 crowns each ($40,500 in 1901) were created. Five annual prizes for design at that value now ($854,000 in 1993 dollars increased by inflation, but without additions from investment) would require an endowment today of $17,080,000 each (assuming 5% of principal to be used for the prize) for a total for five of $85,400,000. Awarded less frequently, the prizes would require less endowment.

The time is right to consider this seriously. The world needs design thinking at the highest levels. Let's reward it appropriately and encourage our youth to aspire to recognition for it.