

Generating Design Excitement:

Urban Design Awards for Winnipeg

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Abstract

What is good urban design anyway? Consensus on this issue may be difficult to achieve, but there are ways to open the discussion and to recognize work that strengthens the urban fabric and makes the city a better place to live.

Urban design awards offer designers and planners an opportunity to be acknowledged for their work. They also provide a venue for public dialogue about design issues in cities. Many organizations sponsor awards to honour excellence in their fields, but while opportunities for the recognition of stellar urban design exist at the national level, there is no local urban design award program in Manitoba.

Design award programs in Montréal, Toronto, and the United Kingdom are investigated in order to cull best practices from successful

existing programs. This case study highlights the potential opportunities and barriers faced by the city of Winnipeg in implementing similar design recognition strategies.

Through this exploration, an urban design award package is developed for the city of Winnipeg, illustrating how local projects can be celebrated and discussed by citizens, politicians, planners, and designers.

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Background & Context

The Canadian Institute of Planners defines urban design as “the process of giving physical design direction to urban growth, conservation, and change. It is understood to include landscape as well as buildings, both preservation and new construction, and rural areas as well as cities” (Canadian Institute of Planners - National Urban Design Interest Group, 2008a, based on a definition by Jonathoan Barnett). With such a broad definition, it is clear that urban design affects the daily life of every citizen. Quality urban design is recognized by many designers and citizens as an important aspect of a great city.

The Urban Design Alliance identifies some of the benefits of high quality urban design: “Good design can help promote sustainable development; improve the quality of the existing environment; attract business and investment; reinforce civic pride and a sense of place; underpin the role of towns and cities as centres of culture and social activity; and relieve pressure for developments in out of town locations and on greenfield sites. Through its emphasis on quality in development it can also help to secure continued public acceptance of necessary new development” (Canadian Institute of Planners - National Urban Design Interest Group, 2008b).

Yet in many cities urban design is not a topic of conversation in any major public forum. This is certainly the case in Winnipeg. One way to open discussion and to acknowledge the importance of design is through urban design award programs.

Award programs provide an opportunity for professionals and citizens to engage in public discussions regarding urban design in a city. They can generate excitement for high quality projects while increasing public interest in design issues. While the design professions generally express a wish to raise public awareness regarding design issues and to increase the standard of design in urban areas, there is not generally a great deal of active outreach to the broader community.

AWARD PROGRAMS GENERATE A BUZZ ABOUT GREAT URBAN DESIGN WHILE REINFORCING A SENSE OF PLACE IN A CITY.

Professional organizations, like the provincial affiliates of the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP), the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects (CSLA), and the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC), are well-placed to stimulate public discussion on design. In Winnipeg however these organizations have most recently focused on celebrating success within their own disciplines or at a national level. While this is important, it does not tend to generate local buzz, excitement, or discussion, even when a project located in the city is honoured with an award.

In order to develop a “made in Winnipeg” approach, several programs celebrating urban design were investigated. The Toronto Urban Design Awards and the Commerce Design Montréal contest are both successful design award programs. The Urban Design Alliance’s Design Week is an exciting program highlighting urban design in the United Kingdom. City Crossing was an international design competition held in Winnipeg in 2004. Various aspects of each of these programs are incorporated into the proposal for the Winnipeg Urban Design Awards.

Toronto Urban Design Awards

Increasingly, cities across Canada are recognizing local achievements in design which are then submitted to the RAIC's biennial National Urban Design Awards, a program supported by both the CIP and the CSLA. In Toronto, projects are submitted for review by jury in a number of categories covering various scales of design and planning. The awards are held every second year, with winners automatically entered into RAIC's National Awards the following year.

The Toronto Urban Design Awards offer a strong, well-established framework on which to pattern award programs in other cities. However, this program's connection to the RAIC, the professional organization of Canadian architects, means that the model may not be broad enough to recognize all local achievements related to urban design in Winnipeg. Additionally, as a nationally regulated program, it may not allow the flexibility necessary to respond to urban design challenges and successes in a city-specific context.

Commerce Design Montréal

This program has become a model for design award programs around the world. Prizes are awarded to businesses in recognition of excellence in interior and storefront design, with a subsequent expansion to the scheme recognizing improvement to commercial arteries. The program was successful in its engagement of the city's business community.

While Montréal has discontinued its awards in order to focus on other areas, the program has been adapted in recent years by other communities including Saint-Etienne, France and New York's Times Square business association, Times Square Alliance. In these adaptations, the public has the opportunity to select a People's Choice award from among the jury's top selections. This program appears to be successful at reaching a broader audience, but has quite a narrow focus in terms of the type of design being rewarded.

Urban Design Alliance (UDAL)

The Urban Design Alliance is a collaboration between a variety of institutions and organizations representing professionals from engineers to building conservationists and architects to planners. The scheme promoted by UDAL is not an awards program but rather an event. Every year this British organization sponsors Urban Design Week. Events include tours, talks, conferences, courses, workshops, and displays with a focus on education for both professionals and the general public.

City Crossing Design Competition, Winnipeg

In 2004, the City of Winnipeg held a design competition to generate ideas for a redevelopment of the corner of Portage Avenue and Main Street. City Crossing was organized by the City of Winnipeg with the support of private stakeholders, the Winnipeg Foundation, the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ, Forks North Portage Partnership as well as the provincial professional design organizations. For this competition the Planning Branch worked with a steering committee and a facilitator to establish a vision for the competition and to select a jury. The jury consisted of national and international practitioners and academics from the design disciplines. This format generally seemed to work well in the Winnipeg context. Though some of the practices in the City Crossing competition were criticized, the main structure of the program seemed to be successful and well-received.

A FOCUS ON CELEBRATION AND EDUCATION TO INCREASE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION.

Lessons Learned

Each of the programs explored above has advantages and disadvantages. Strategies that have worked well elsewhere serve as useful precedents but will not necessarily work in Winnipeg without adjustments.

An important variable is the intention of the award program. The Toronto Urban Design Awards are specifically designed to allow award-winners to move on to a national award program. The Commerce Design Montréal model targets the business community and the Urban Design Alliance's Urban Design Week focuses on education while the City Crossing Design Competition was a one-off idea generator. The Winnipeg Urban Design Award program aims to combine some of these objectives into a model that focuses on celebration, education, and participation.

Celebration

A primary objective of an award program in Winnipeg should be to celebrate our successes in order to encourage designers and developers to overcome the barriers or hurdles they see as impeding good design.

Education & Participation

Based on the strong focus on design education that would be important to a successful urban design award program in Winnipeg, the best format would likely be a series of juried awards with a People's Choice award winner selected from among the jury's award winners by popular public vote.

These events could be the kick-off and the wrap-up respectively for a Winnipeg Design Week, a week-long series of events based on the model used by the Urban Design Alliance in the United Kingdom. There needs to be a strong educational component. Inspiration for exceptional urban design can be found by looking at stellar examples from around the world.

The events would offer Winnipeggers the opportunity to express their opinions about

urban design in their city. Specific groups that would be important to engage include youth, business, and policy makers.

Our youth are clearly the community that can carry forward a design culture in the city as something that is important to them. Engaging youth could involve implementing awards for young designers, hosting youth jury members, or implementing an awards category specifically relating to young people's needs and interests. As the Commerce Design Montréal awards have shown, it can also be fruitful to reward the business community for demanding good design. Policy makers and politicians can be more difficult to engage in a meaningful way. As the event gains community support, it may be appropriate to have a local councilor or even the mayor participate as an honorary jury member or chair person.

Administration of Awards

The City of Winnipeg is unlikely to undertake an awards program in the near future independently. The time and financial requirements are simply too great for the small staff that would be available at this time. Currently, City urban designers work with the Winnipeg Urban Design Advisory Committee (UDAC) to evaluate and improve urban design in the downtown. UDAC is a format that is working well for design approvals and recommendations, but an awards program would not be within the committee's mandate. Additionally, UDAC is a volunteer-run organization. The professionals who participate are generally interested in high design standards for the city, but it would not be realistic to expect them to organize such a large event as part of their role on UDAC.

For a successful urban design awards program in Winnipeg, a partnership would be necessary. The City of Winnipeg could and should be a major stakeholder, supported by others including representation from the professional organizations.

It is essential for the proposed awards program to be truly multidisciplinary and specific to Winnipeg. A perceived lack in the promotion of a multidisciplinary approach was a criticism of the City Crossing competition which, due to the borrowing of a pre-existing competition format, required a licensed architect on every team and was seen to be somewhat exclusive.

A first step would be to form an initial steering committee and to determine what groups would be interested in committing resources to the event. These organizations would then serve as the partnership sponsors and help to select additional members of the official steering committee. The steering committee

is responsible for organizing the events for the week and will also select the jury members. The committee would also be responsible for the development and long term maintenance of an event website. The event should be widely advertised throughout the city as well as nationally through the professional organizations in order to ensure that all projects have an opportunity to be submitted.

It is essential that any program involve a rigorous and highly structured selection process. The process must be seen to be fair and transparent if the program is to have credibility and thereby the support of everyone affected and involved.



Place Joseph Royal on Provencher Boulevard is a newly constructed mixed use development.



Westminster Avenue in Wolseley features a pedestrian-scaled streetscape.

Winnipeg Urban Design Awards Package

Objectives

The Winnipeg Urban Design Awards and the surrounding events are intended to recognize excellence in design in our city and to honour those who have participated in the development of these projects. The events will simultaneously generate dialogue about public space and the importance of exceptional urban design in creating livable cities. Design matters to all citizens and the intention is to reach as many Winnipeggers as possible through the program.

Rationale:

Winnipeg's awards should focus on celebrating successes, on developing civic design literacy, and on generating enthusiasm and discussion. While other cities have developed a civic culture that privileges good design, Winnipeg has yet to achieve this.

Format

The Winnipeg Urban Design Awards Ceremony is just one of several events involved in Urban Design Week. Prizes are awarded by a jury in a range of categories. Following the award announcement, the jury report and the submissions are on display for one week during which time the general public is invited to review the award-winning submissions and vote either in person at one of the week's events or through ballots printed in local newspapers to select their favourite project for the People's Choice Award. Throughout the week, panel discussions are held at the venue. At the end of the week, a second Awards Ceremony is held to present the People's Choice Award.

Rationale:

A juried contest can serve to elevate the level of prestige attributed to the awards. A panel of experts also increases the opportunity for education, learning, and informed conversation about design issues. At the same time, it is essential to engage the public, politicians, and the media in the process. While "uncensored" voting by the public (selecting from all the submissions) could be seen as lowering the standard of the discussion (Barber, 2006), directed voting (selecting from "jury-approved" submissions) allows the public to be directly involved in the awarding of a prize. A People's Choice Award is used in the very successful model developed by the Commerce Design Montréal contest. A week-long format also allows time for knowledge to be passed between the jury and the public through formal and informal discussions.



Plaza at The Forks is a skatepark integrated into a National Historic Site.

Award Categories

Initial Phase

Urban Elements (including public art, fences, benches, canopies, etc.)
Buildings in Context
Open Spaces
Public Places
Advocate for Design
Student Projects
People's Choice

Future Phases

Visions and Master Plans
Urban Programming
Commercial Arteries
Signage
Places for Youth
Grassroots Initiative
Rising Star (designer under 35)
Urban journalism/communication

Rationale:

The initial set of categories covers a range of design scales, from smaller urban elements through buildings to open spaces. At the same time, it recognizes that the long-term success of a project is at least as important as the excitement surrounding new projects. The Public Place category is intended to recognize places, whether they be streetscapes, neighbourhoods, or parks that continue to contribute to the city throughout years of use. The importance of individuals to the process of promoting design excellence is highlighted through the Advocate for Design award. The steering committee could tailor the call for student projects every year in order to highlight current design discussion. Finally, the People's Choice award allows the public to become involved in the selection process by identifying its favourite project from among the award winners. Additional categories focusing on process and citizen involvement as well as additional scales of design could be added in future phases.

Eligibility

To be eligible for submission, the project must be situated within the City of Winnipeg. Anyone, whether they were involved in the design and implementation or not, is welcome to nominate a project so long as the submission is complete. Entries in the Urban Elements/Fragments, Buildings in Context, and Sustainable Design categories should consist of fully built projects completed within the last 5 years. Previous winning entries in most categories are not eligible for renomination, exceptions include the Public Place and the Advocate for Design categories.

Rationale:

The focus is on the City of Winnipeg rather than on a specific design discipline or profession. Recent design is prioritized in most categories, however in the Public Place category successful nominations will likely be well-established in the city.

Submission Requirements

As they are received, entries will be numbered, with the poster and written summary going to the jury members and the general requirements going to administrative staff only.

1. General Requirements

Including the following, to be submitted in a sealed, unmarked envelope.

Entry form & entry fee

One entry form must be completed for every project. Each entry must be accompanied by a cheque or money order in the amount of \$100.00 payable to XXXX. Entry fees for student projects are reduced to \$20.00.

Credit list

The list of key consultants for the project including all organizations and key personnel involved with the success of the project.

Images

A maximum of twenty (20) individual images of the project for publication purposes. These may be images already presented on the poster or additional images.

Digital copy of submission

Two (2) disks each containing a digital copy of all submission requirements.

2. Poster

Projects must be presented on one (1) rigid poster having dimensions no larger than 915 x 915mm (36" x 36"). Boards must be free of any identification of the project team member(s).

3. Written Summary

Including the following, to be submitted in an unmarked enveloped:

Project summary

A maximum of 300 words on one (1) 216 x 280mm (8.5" x 11") sheet describing the project. This description should emphasize the project's urban design intentions and illustrate its success.

Directions to site

Each project shortlisted by the jury will be visited. It is essential to talk with clients and users in order to assess design excellence irrespective of the size or complexity of the project.

Rationale:

These requirements are adapted from other awards programs. A poster is not a requirement for all existing programs, but is important for public display purposes. It is also important to limit the quantity of information being submitted for review both so as not to exhaust the jury and to create an equal playing field for all entries. Project visits are a practice instituted by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in their design award program. It allows jury members to see firsthand how the project fulfills its intentions.

Evaluation Considerations

Assessment criteria would necessarily have slight variations depending on the category. The main focus of the criteria will be on the creation of excellent public space. Some of the more universal criteria for projects would include:

- Positive contribution to the public realm/quality of place
 - Successful integration with surrounding urban fabric
 - Demonstration of fulfilling a clearly articulated urban design intent
 - Establishment of a new benchmark for design excellence
 - Exemplary application of the City of Winnipeg's Urban Design Guideline documents
 - Positive contribution to a sustainable environment
 - Innovation and uniqueness of the built project
- (closely adapted from the Toronto Urban Design Awards)

In categories where a person's contribution is being considered, criteria might include such considerations as:

- Nominee's work has increased public understanding of urban design
- Nominee has shown a clear understanding of, and support for, the role of urban design in cities

(adapted from the American Planning Association's National Planning Awards)

Rationale:

Evaluation criteria must be clear before submissions are called for. This is an important aspect of a credible process.

Jury

A jury of up to seven (7), but no less than four (4) members will be selected by the steering committee. Jurors will come from diverse backgrounds but will generally be either design practitioners or academics. A mix of local and national/international representatives will be sought.

Ideally, each of the four main professional design associations (Manitoba Professional Planners Institute, Manitoba Association of Landscape Architecture, Manitoba Association of Architects, and Professional Interior Designers Institute of Manitoba) would be represented by local professionals. These representatives would bring a knowledge of the context of the project and the city to the jury. Additional jury members should also be invited to bring an outside view to an assessment of Winnipeg's urban design. Including the views of non-local professionals can help to reduce the potential for conflict of interest to exclude too many jury members from participating in the evaluation of a particular project. At the same time, invited guests often brings a sense of prestige to an event.

Recognition/Publication

A press conference will be held to announce the jury's decision. Winning projects will be published in a full-size newspaper insert in the week following the jury's announcement. Press releases will be sent to all major newspapers and radio stations in the city and will also be sent to the national professional organizations. Award winners will be offered the opportunity to speak briefly at the the wrap-up event later in the week.

Jury Report

The jury report will be available for public viewing online immediately following the announcement of the award winners. Paper copies will also be available for viewing at the locations displaying the submissions.



This community garden on Selkirk Avenue is an example of the sort of initiative that might be celebrated as a grassroots initiative.

Looking Ahead

There is a clear need to identify successful urban design projects in Winnipeg and to encourage high design standards. Three key aspects of this are celebration, education, and participation.

Initially, the award program should be limited enough to ensure that the quality of events, rather than the quantity, are the focus. As the program gains recognition however, there is an opportunity to increase its scope by increasing the number of award categories and the number of Urban Design Week events. Existing events such as the Prairie Architecture Awards or Doors Open Winnipeg may be able to tie in to Urban Design Week either by taking place at the same time or by offering some form of workshop during the week.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO INCORPORATE EXISTING DESIGN FOCUSED EVENTS AND TO DEVELOP NEW ONES.

In the future, the Winnipeg Urban Design Awards steering committee may be viewed as resource. The organization could become involved in producing reports related to Winnipeg urban design issues, in running future design competitions, and in planning additional events promoting urban design in the city.

Ultimately, an urban design award program would recognize design excellence within Winnipeg while generating excitement and interest in design issues in the city.

About the Collaborators

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Photo Credits

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Image on page 9: Selkirk Avenue Community Garden, Dave Danyluk.

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