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Not Just Another Awards Show

What's Your Reaction?

Ours is the city of the Emmys, the Oscars, and, often, the Grammys. Awards in advertising, architecture, and planning also abound. Our journalism community alone has as many as six different events each year: the Southern California Journalism Awards, which I coproduced for four years, and the Golden Mikes are just two of them. The Envelope, an *LA Times* blog, is devoted solely to the awards season.

Which would seem to beg this question: does LA's creative community really need another awards show? Can it sustain one? The surprising answers, based on what I saw last Saturday's inaugural Los Angeles Real Creativity awards, are a resounding "yes."

A project of the Urban Land Institute Los Angeles, the so-called LARCs honor "potentially world-changing thought" and "those who have distinguished themselves through unparalleled creative achievement." The organizers say that's meant to span design, architecture, art, culture, and business. And, the winners, announced on December 5 at a packed dinner in the lobby of 5900 Wilshire, highlighted that diversity.

Symbolically, the dinner was held just across the street from Chris Burden's masterful "Urban Light" Courtyard at the Los Angeles County Museum. The literally landmark sculpture by Burden incorporates more than two hundred restored cast-iron lampposts from Los Angeles County.

Guests drank wine and imagined a model city overseen by planner James Rojas nearby. Then they crossed Wilshire to find the lobby of an aging business tower transformed by dramatic lighting, video projections, and bustling waiters.

Frances Anderton, host of DnA, KCRW's monthly architecture show, kept things crackling as MC from the precariously high stage. The 240 or so attendees, most in black tie, crowded rows of long tables emanating from the stage.

Ticket prices had been kept reasonable by an impressive list of sponsors including AEG, Variety, Morgan Stanley, Tiffany, and the Ratkovich Company. The organizers deserve special praise for pulling together such a prestigious pool in today's economy. Event chair Stan Ross, who heads USC's Lusk Center for Real Estate, and Wayne Ratkovich were among those credited with opening doors.

The evening's highlight for me was the winner in the Design category. The award goes to an especially innovative project still in its conceptual stage - in this case, the Hollywood Freeway Central Park.

The 44-acre green space would sit atop the 101 Freeway from Bronson Avenue to Santa Monica Boulevard.

The idea has kicked around for over twenty-five years and recently got some new legs. It would bring green space and parkland to a part of Hollywood famously low on park space. Feasibility and planning studies have been completed. And recently a Friends of the Hollywood Central Park nonprofit was organized. While certainly not the first cap park in the nation, the Hollywood park would be the first in the LA area, where finding a piece of land this size to buy is not easy.

This type of out-of-the-box thinking to solve practical problems in our city does not yet have a place in our events season. It sold me on the idea that the LARCs were bringing something new and necessary to our community.

And, let's not forget the kind of momentum that an award like a LARC can bring to a project as it fundraises its way into reality. "ULI LA made a big effort to find projects that no one knew about," said Laurie Goldman, president of the nonprofit Friends of the Hollywood Central Park. "It helps with media and public awareness." That's the kind of quid pro quo that I really like.

Each of the night's four awards was presented by a so-called luminary: Stuart Ketchum, Stan Ross, and Buzz McCoy. Frank Gehry was the last to present, for Enterprise. This category is meant to recognize an especial effective and innovative project or group.

Finalists included Wilson Meany Sullivan, the developers for Hollywood Park Tomorrow, a community-based effort to remake the racetrack as mixed use. Mar Vista is getting high marks these days as a progressive and sublimely local community. It was another finalist. But YOLA<http://www.laphil.com/yola/>, headed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic's new conductor Gustavo Dudamel, took the prize.

The ambitious enterprise aims to build youth orchestras around the city. The fever around Dudamel is infectious, and the need to get music back into the schools is urgent. But as I remarked to the gentlemen sitting next to me, I would have felt better about this winner if it worked at seeding brass bands around the city.

Other winners were Imagine Mars, a joint project of NASA and JPL, which took top honors in the "Idea" category. In the "Place" category, Santa Monica College's new Academy of Entertainment and Technology campus won. It beat out Bert Green Fine Art Gallery and the Downtown LA Art Walk - a surprise to some given the profound impact the Art Walk has had on Downtown and our gravitation toward it. But, I saw it as a sign of the LARCs willingness to trend toward the future in its honorees.

A panel of urban and architectural thinkers selected the finalists and winners. Another set of awards is apparently already in the works. Thumbs up for a valuable set of honors that started with a big splash. Now, for next time: how about a more porous selection process and an even wider field of nominees?

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