



LET'S GET CRITICAL

Leon van Schaik and Paul Minifie Clark respond to the **REVISITED** National Architecture Awards.



The goal should not be to demonstrate a 'professional' level of accepted 'best practice'. The best major projects have often been quite unlike buildings seen in journals or produced by established practitioners.... A major project then, is not just a building design, it is also a set of ideas and an argument that links those ideas in to the design in a way that is coherent and convincing.

Excerpt from Major Project Brief authored by Paul Minifie

In Architecture Australia, 2012, Leon Van Schaik wrote a frustrated and honest plea for a more inclusive national award system - one that does not reduce architectural merit to an ocular pornography. "Can photography represent palpable reality of works of architecture?" Van schaik asks. He answers his own question, and rightly so, "I find the photographic conventions used in representing works submitted and short-listed produce a numbing impression of

in 2012, "from the photographic evidence you may observe in the preceding pages, they all go to worthy recipients". And likewise for RMIT's short-list: these projects stand tall on their own merit.

However, there may be some systemic problems with defining 'excellence', what we desire of the best among us, what we desire of ourselves and, most importantly, what we desire of our architectural culture.

Yet, RMIT Architecture, an institution whose responsibility is to nurture the 'culture' of its discipline (which may include processes of taxonomy and definition as in the case of Van Schaik's work) seems to fail in the same ways as the National Awards. There are some overlapping behaviours of parenting between them that has sustained a prophylactic version of 'excellence'. Experimentation comes with a risk of failure.

Not one that could be easily pigeon holed, or a practice that might be the drab replication of an existing one - particularly if it is replicating the practice of its supervisor - rather morbid concept indeed. There are examples of such Major Projects whose futures unknown have resulted in failure, a phantom unrecognised, or whose success has had drastic consequences for the school.

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sameness that visits to the building would, I am convinced, dispel." Could these same principles be applied to the RMIT's short list for the 2016 Australian Institute of Architects Graduate Prize for Architectural Excellence for RMIT University Awarded by our Industry Sponsor Elenberg Fraser I wonder? And, although, these student works are not built, is this system "sadly typical in the way in which it normalizes and merges opinion"? Just as Van Schaik identifies of the National Architecture awards

"What of the concept of architectural culture that the awards process implies? I very much doubt that there is an overt concept. Other than some notion that peer review in a competitive process encourages "excellence," whatever that - in the absence of a definition that is rooted in a concept of the process of building a material culture - might be." This is the crux of his frustration: *the absence of a definition that is rooted in a concept of the process of building material culture.*

What we have nurtured is a system of recognising and promoting an 'excellence' that has little to do with the "outliers or experiment" - mitigating to a degree the possibility of experimentation to occur within the practice of Major Project. What is missing from the immediacy of the award system is a representation of the student's practice and emphasis on their future possibility. An experimental practice might be one that is strongly founded and argued but one with an unknown future.

Most Major Projects probably mean very little in the course of one's practice but RMIT has chosen to place specific significance on its ability to cultivate research and experiment.

How is RMIT to measure such a narrative and complex activity such as 'one's practice'? Could Van Schaik's criticism of the lack of spatiality as a criteria of the national awards be analogous to the failure to recognise the spatiality of a major project?



A spatiality that is a hermeneutic mesh, an entanglement of narrative, drawing, writing, presenting, ideas, modelling, robotics – the various outputs that defines a major project and also defines one’s practice? Melinda Payne in *Transition* volumes 59-60 addresses the issue of architecture as product, “the introduction of reproductive processes into architectural practice has effected a profound transformation of the relationship between maker and object, object and viewer into those of ‘producer, product and consumer’”. Could the product-focus of major project be a symptom of “photography, lithography, mass media publications and tourism [that] have had an enormous effect upon the reception of architecture and social processes of consumption[?]” (Payne). This claim is not unlike that of Van Schaik. We must remain faithful to the forbearer of this essay, Leon, who, and I think rightly so, remains questioning rather than informative and hopeful rather than cynical. I do, however, suggest that the following is bad parenting: the application of the competitive environment of the work place to a research and experiment based university program by providing incentives, especially economic ones.

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the fear builds up like scum in the cracks of her keyboard over the five years of catching reflections in the screen, reflections that appear to her as zeros. Building her practice piece by piece she arrives in her last semester to the most important moment of self-discovery, the most important moment of risk, of experiment, and teetering on the edge of failure, she questions herself.

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Albeit, only ever so slightly but it is enough so that the moment of discovery disappears or is never quite approached. Success/failure are replaced with a journey-less reproduction of ‘excellence’.

The binary has become the way the student thinks of herself, producing not only those that strive for an established ‘excellence’, striving to be a one, but those withdrawing into cultural non-participation as in the case of my friend Ed. Ed, who refuses to attend the ceremonies, because he “can’t stand the bullshit” (referring to the awards), has anti-socially resided to failure.

And importantly to the phasing relationship between these two systems of power that produces a truth or a body politic. Institutional governance is folded into our own systems of self-governance and the object and the subject develop in entanglement with one another in some circular or mesh-like relationship.

Foucault realised as he developed in age and in thought that moving the seed of emancipation from the power-holding-other, to the self, was not only theoretically fashionable but politically volatile. We, the students who are governed by these awards, are as much responsible for them, their existence, and their manifest response, as the institution that employs them as a tool of production and education.

The film industry has battled with the limitations of an award based system for over fifty years.

Affirmative Image Committee. Littlefeather approached the podium and rather than take the award, she set down a letter and said, “I’m representing Marlon Brando this evening and he has asked me to tell you ... that he very regretfully cannot accept this very generous award. And the reasons for this being are the treatment of American Indians today by the film industry.”

All this is really a question that probes the award system’s legitimacy as a healthy part of a university education. A question I grapple with each semester and a question for which every student has an opinion. One thing is clear: celebrating one another is obviously an important part of growing an architectural culture but do we really need awards to do this? Would major project be better off without them at all?

Somewhere between Leon Van Schaik, Michel Foucault and Sacheen Littlefeather there might be an answer but for now the question remains.

-Unless otherwise stated all quotations from: van Schaik, Leon, 2012, “Lets Get Critical: response to the 2012 AIA National Award Winners” Architecture Australia 101/6 (Nov/Dec 2012)

-Payne, Melinda, 1998, “Architectural Journals and the Avante-Garde”, Transition, Issues 59/60, p23

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Incentives construct a binary, a dialectic, an argument that becomes the very subject of the project itself. It is a double bind - all the zeros want to be ones, albeit unconsciously, and in an atmosphere of pressure and fear the project begins to twist and revolve around the ‘excellence’ that is established by the institution. The zero-wanting-to-be-one is a weakness particular to the demographic of the major project student –

Even those uncaring about award systems, who brave a straight face when their colleagues are called to the front, can’t help but feel disappointment or withdrawnness – an outsider not by some standard of Otherness derived from one’s self, or one’s own practice, but an outsider by impotence and powerlessness. All this is a case of self-discipline, referring here to Foucault who shifted his notion of discipline from the institutionally-imposed to the self-imposed.

In 1962 George C. Scott refused his Academy award believing he was not in competition with other actors and went even further, claiming the awards were a “two-hour meat parade, a public display with contrived suspense for economic reasons.” And in 1973 Marlon Brando failed to attend the awards, sending Sacheen Littlefeather, a native American actress and president, at the time, of the National Native American

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