

Educating the Educators

by JAMES KIRKPATRICK, AIA

Who knew that homework was still being assigned so many years after completing school? In preparation to sit on the jury for the 2008 TASA/TASB Exhibit of School Architecture, I spent about 30 hours studying the 96 entries prior to the meeting in Austin. I combed through all of them at least four times, all the while keeping in mind the criteria—design, educational appropriateness, innovation, process of planning, sustainability, and value.

Having designed facilities for multiple school districts, I always kept in mind how children are likely to experience that particular school and how that experience will affect their education. I know how challenging school design can be for an architect who must also focus on form and function. Among this year's jurors were three architects. The other two architect jurors were Lee Burch, AIA, of Jacobs Carter Burgess in Houston; and Barb von der Heydt, district architect for Fort Worth ISD. I served as an alternate member. The facilitator was Keith Hickman, AIA, of KAHickman Architects and Interior Designers in Round Rock.

Overall, this year's entries were exceptional. There were a few clunkers though, especially with what some architects call innovation. For example, using recycled materials in a building is not innovative architecture. That's responsible architecture. And entering the same design twice – for schools in two different districts, changing the

facade only slightly – is not innovation. I find it hard to believe that two school districts would come up with the same exact programming needs simultaneously.

Credit is due though to all the firms implementing sustainability into their designs. With the population booming all across the state, any energy savings will go a long way.

Even more credit is due to those firms – and to their clients! – that did their homework to design with children in mind. I give an A+ to Coppell ISD Superintendent Jeff Turner who believes school design should meet educational programming needs, thus meeting the needs of the students, above all else. His attitude was like a breath of fresh air compared to another member of the jury who favored the cheapest building cost over all other options.

The opinions expressed by this year's jurors were indeed diverse. I arrived in Austin with what I thought was the best of the best, but it's funny how educators and architects don't always see eye to eye. My top 10 didn't even make it into the top 20 of the jury's list. Like most people, school administrators and school board members see buildings differently than architects. But because our children's futures are at stake, it should be up to us – the architects – to share our knowledge with the people charged with making many of the critical decisions about the schools we design. We must inform them so they can ask the right questions, to make sure that their building is making the grade.

James Kirkpatrick, AIA, is the principal of Kirkpatrick Architecture Studio in Denton.



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FINE ARCHITECTURAL CAST STONE

3615 ALMEDA GENOA
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T 713-440-6224 / F 713-440-6228
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