

Redesigning Bay City

RELIABLE INDICES of a city's architectural well-being are normally difficult to come by. You can arbitrarily walk around them or read the property pages of the local paper, but still may not get an accurate picture of the place. Even less will you work out whether it is evolving architecturally or even going backward.

Swansea is very fortunate in that for the past twenty-two years it has held an annual event called the Lord Mayor's Design Awards. Over the last seven years especially, these have been an unwitting barometer of the improving quality of the city's new buildings.

The Lord Mayor's Design Awards were the brainchild of Trevor Osborne, Swansea's much respected Director of Development.

In 1985, when Charles Thomas was Lord Mayor, Osborne sent a paper to Policy Committee, in those pre-cabinet days when decision-making evolved on a monthly committee cycle. He called for the creation of an awards scheme that would recognise new design being done in the city. His idea was accepted and the scheme has been running ever since.

In the early 1980s there were only a handful of entries each year and the reward for winning was actually a small cash prize. Nowadays the awards generally attract thirty to forty entries every year and the "prize" is the recognition that goes with winning what has become Wales's longest-running design awards scheme.

Early on, the awards ceremony could be wrapped up in the lunch hour with a modest buffet in the Guildhall's smallest function room. Last year's awards evening attracted four



hundred guests to a black tie event held in the grand setting of the Brangwyn Hall.

Moira Lucas is a conservation officer with the City and County of Swansea who has been involved with the scheme since 1990. She argues that, "We want our guests to be impressed with the Council, so we should be the best host we can, with lighting and set-dressing all adding to the wow factor".

I can testify that the Lord Mayor's Design Awards have become a feature of the Swansea's social calendar, and a welcome diversion from the remorseless onslaught of the Christmas festivities in late November. What began as a modest function to highlight a handful of the best new buildings in the city has slowly metamorphosed into a social event structured around architecture.

As a social event, however, it is also a superb vehicle for "networking". For Moira Lucas, "It's about putting architects and ►

Designed in 2003 by Boyes Rees architects, **Technium Digital** was built on the campus of the University of Wales and is the last of the three Techniums to have been built in the city. It achieves

its impact through a collage of different architectural motifs that have been floating around in the *zeitgeist* for the last ten years or more. The rest of the campus benefits from its adventurousness.



Frank Gehry's **Guggenheim Museum** at Bilbao shows how a former industrial seaport could kick start its rejuvenation with an iconic building



◀ funders in the same room.” I attended last year’s event and, once we’d been seated and the introductions made, the business cards fairly flew around the table. I was sitting with an architect, his client, a councillor plus husband and a regional Director of the Bank of Scotland.

This networking dimension is not to be sneered at and works as an important draw not just for the people up for awards but also for the clients and contractors invited. How otherwise would you get this mix of people together other than when involved in an actual project?

The awards have changed and adapted over the intervening twenty-two years. The judges now use a score sheet which marks each project on variables such as context and siting; use of materials and finishes; visual impact and aesthetic qualities; and fitness for purpose.

Projects are marked out of ten against each criterion. Judging is undertaken by a mixed panel that includes the council,



professionals, academics and the voluntary sector.

In 2006 its members were the Lord Mayor, the cabinet member for Environment, two development control committee chairs, the Director of Environment, the President of the Royal Society of Architects in Wales, a representative of the Wales Landscape Group, the Chair of the City Centre Partnership Group, a member of the Welsh Disability Rights Commission, representatives of the Gower Society and the West Wales Chamber of Commerce, an architectural science specialist from the Welsh ▶

above the Wales National Pool on Ashleigh Road (design by Limbrick Architecture and Design) looks nothing like your bog-standard municipal swimming pool. Built in 2004 to Olympic standards this building is the high-tech shed as leisure facility. The main façade is clad in sun shades to reduce solar gain with timber boarding and glazing to the rear. As a consequence it is a low-impact yet sleekly modern structure that comes to life as an architectural experience when you get inside.

below The Day-Surgery Unit at Singleton Hospital, designed in 2006 by Nightingale Associates, can be found a stones’ throw away from the National Pool. This modestly-sized building with its austere overtones of Mies van der Rohe is an elegant addition to a hospital campus with the usual unremarkable collection of oddments built over time. This “cool” and minimal design is completely unexpected, is easily missed yet once seen is instantly committed to the memory.



left Technium II was built in 2004 on a highly visible site at the eastern gateway into Swansea. Traffic coming into Swansea is held at traffic lights that function to define an artificial threshold to the city before it is properly entered. In urban design terms the site demanded an eye-catching design and this was duly delivered. Technium II's sculptural form is a perfect metaphor for arrival in a modern city and sets up all sorts of architectural expectations that the city is still striving to emulate. The architects were Kennedy James Griffiths, now part of Powell Althorpe.

above The National Waterfront Museum Winner of a national Civic Trust Award in 2006 this is a thoroughly modern building in slate, steel and glass that has a strong sense of purpose and historic reflections in form and design. The architects were Wilkinson Eyre. (Photo Matthew Griffiths)



◀ School of Architecture and a representative of Cadw.

Projects are considered according to category. In 2006 there were separate categories for schemes costing more than £1M; between £250,000 and £1M; and under £250,000. There were also awards for the best vernacular feature in Gower, conservation, landscaping, architectural enhancement, and commercial and industrial development. There was a special City Centre Partnership Award.

The awards evening normally kicks off with a respected speaker giving a thought-provoking address. In 2005 this was given by Professor Richard Weston of the Welsh School of Architecture; last year it was the turn of the highly-talented Cardiff architect, Chris Loyn. Richard Weston thinks that the awards are an admirable initiative. Locally-based schemes are surprisingly few in the UK but he is sure that they encourage better standards of design. He argues that they have undoubtedly contributed to Swansea's growing reputation as an innovative, forward-looking city. The architect of the Wales Millennium Centre, Jonathan Adams, was a judge in 2006. He has really been impressed by Swansea's awards. "It is the only award scheme that I have been involved in that seems to catch the imagination of the participating public".

A watershed occurred in terms of Swansea and its love/hate relationship with modern architecture in 1993. This was when Swansea was chosen as the UK's City of Literature and given the funds and opportunity to celebrate it with a new building. An architectural competition was devised.

Five architectural practices were asked to submit schemes: Stirling-Wilford (James Stirling had just died), Michael Graves (the American post-modernist actually came to Swansea to present his scheme), Will Alsop, Chassay Architects, and the avant-garde practice of Branson-Coates.

The whole exercise ended in tears. The submissions were published in the local press and the public invited to vote on their favourite. Not only did the public not like the judges' choice of Will Alsop, they failed to see any merit in the others as well.

An early-Victorian classical building was converted by a firm of Cardiff architects instead and everyone went home happy. Everyone, that is, except for Alsop, who sued the Council for fees for additional work done. His winning scheme, a wonderful multi-coloured rectangle on splayed stilts, disappeared back into his plan chest. The design resurfaced in mutated form as a public library in Peckham, London and

left Dewi Evans' "The Nook" at Oxwich is one of the many additions to Gower villages to have hit the planning office at Swansea. Few are as outgoing and clearly "new" as this private home. All too often new-builds or conversions are well-mannered to the point of invisibility. Dewi Evans' project in a sensitive setting is proof positive that Swansea can countenance new design in a rural setting and everyone wins out. The scheme came first in 2006 for projects costing under £250,000. right commended in the same category was 11 Westcliff at Mumbles, designed by Huw Griffiths

was universally admired. Not too long after this Swansea began to show signs of embracing modern architecture. Perhaps it was the effect of seeing Cardiff experience much the same embarrassment with the competition to design an Opera House in Cardiff Bay.

Cardiff eventually salvaged its reputation when Jonathan Adams rode over the hill with his design for the Wales Millennium Centre. Ironically, he had quit Will Alsop's London practice in London to return to Wales in order to work on the Millennium Centre scheme with the Percy Thomas Partnership.

The very public failure of two major architectural competitions for schemes in rival cities within such a short space of time was initially traumatic. But both cities learned a lot from the experience.

It's arguable that in some ways the winners of both competitions (Will Alsop and Zaha Hadid) were too individual to cope with, yet within a few years both Swansea and Cardiff showed that the lesson had been learned that an exciting piece of modern architecture was not something to run away from and could indeed have a positive effect on a city.

The Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao (a city with which Swansea has much in common) shows that a former indus-



trial seaport could set about rejuvenating itself with almost a single “iconic” building.

I think this is borne out by the quality and variety of submissions to the awards since 2000. Since then Swansea has become, if not exactly a hotbed of modern architecture, considerably more responsive to the potential of design. This can be demonstrated by the three Technium buildings built in the city since 2000, the Wales National Pool on Ashleigh Road, the Sail Bridge (our cover picture) over the Tawe and last but not least, the National Waterfront Museum Swansea.

Architects working at a smaller scale are contributing too; Dewi Evans has produced imaginative work at the “Nook” at Oxwich and Capstan House on Oystermouth Road.

Other schemes show the city warming to contemporary

above the 2006 winner of both the City Centre Partnership award and the award for best landscaping scheme – Museum Green, designed by the city council's landscaping team

below the 2006 best conservation scheme – the J shed at Swansea marina, designed by Powell Dobson. This scheme was also commended for architectural enhancement

architecture – Nightingale Associates' day surgery unit for Singleton Hospital, for example, amongst numerous projects either being built or planned.

To the visitor Swansea may still look like a city smothered by a Victorian and Edwardian architectural inheritance. But on a closer look, the townscape is perceptibly changing. The Lord Mayor's Design Awards mark this progress each year.

Swansea's greatest civic virtue is its idiosyncratic nature. This is a place that can regularly surprise the visitor with unexpected gems – not least the Maritime Quarter, the Sail Bridge and the National Waterfront Museum.

I don't think that any of these structures could have been built in Swansea even as recently as twenty years ago. I would also contend that all of them, with the possible exception of “The Nook” at Oxwich, were built with “impact” in mind. There was no intention that they should recede into the background. That they have been created here represents a sea change in thinking for a city so long under an apparent impression that architecture was meant to be an inert backdrop to its daily life.

The hard lessons of the 1990s have been absorbed and now Swansea is actively looks to define itself through the new architecture springing up all over the city. A certain standard has been achieved. Now we must push on – the Lord Mayor's Design Awards will bear witness to our progress.

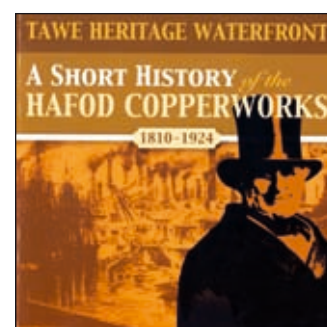
The Awards deserve to get more publicity than they receive. Very rarely does one such a snapshot of what a modern city is building across such a range of sites and building types. Watch this space!

Richard Porch

Swansea's Lord Mayor's Design

Awards are made possible each year largely due to a dedicated and hard working in-house team comprised of Julian Atkins, the environment and conservation team leader, Dave Turner, principal conservation architect, Moira Lucas, senior planning officer and Lisa Roberts, technician.

Current sponsors of the awards include Swalec, Hyder, the West Wales Chamber of Commerce and the Gower Society.



Richard Porch is an author and architectural historian based in Swansea. He has recently authored a history of the Hafod copperworks published by the City and County of Swansea, and *Swansea: history you can see* (Tempus, 2005)