

# What graphic design awards can't see

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By Pau De Riba

This article analyzes the lack of information available to the design awards jury, and how that compromises their ability to actually evaluate the value of a project.

July 8th, 2011. 10 rooms filled with projects, 12 people and 10 hours of jury to choose the best graphic design projects in Europe. If design is not art and therefore is due to the context and function, can a project be evaluated without knowing the audience, objectives, cultural context and the circumstances surrounding the project? How can we compare projects born in such different conditions? How can we evaluate a Ukrainian project from Barcelona? How much time do we need to present a project to a client? How much time can the jury devote to each project? What can be measured and what not in a limited time? What aspects distort the equality of opportunity? Which factors promote and which ones demote? What kind of projects end up selected and which not?

In recent weeks I have been invited to act as jury for the Laus awards in Spain, and shortly after for the Art Directors Club of Europe Awards (I'm the one with the red pants in the picture:). Despite being critical of some limitations of the awards my performance has been more or less like any other jury before, because the limitation is not about a specific jury but the jury system, the process and the conditions under which the jury acts. Despite those limitations notice notice that I still think that's the best (and only) system we have.

Many of the limitations of the awards are due to ignorance of the context of the project in the widest sense (of the order conditions, impact of projects). These factors are neither controlled nor selected by the designer but have a great impact on the final result, so it's worth trying to keep in mind not to compare projects that do not play in the same condition. An example: In 2005 I published an article and a study that analyzed the profile of the winning projects in the Laus awards, which showed how the cultural sector was predominant, followed by expensive products and self-commissioned projects. 73% of projects were commissioned in the cultural sector, 34% were non-profit and only 22% of the projects were aimed at the general public.

Incorporating these criteria is very difficult because they are either difficult to measure, it's difficult to obtain reliable data, or simply do not have time to collect and provide this information to the jury. Some limitations will be difficult to improve, others simply impossible to avoid, but that doesn't mean they don't exist. The organizations of the awards must question the decision-making mechanisms. Identify its weaknesses will help us to improve the validity and legitimacy of the awards, and looking back have already made  some steps in the right direction.

## **What is visible is judged, what's invisible is not judged**

When there is no information about the context and the impact of the projects the jury works with the existing information sources: the form. Therefore, the current model is successful evaluating the execution, innovative graphic languages and the end result. But that's also why awards tend to judge with aesthetic bias. You judge what you see, you don't judge what you don't see. And as the awards are a platform for projecting the image of the sector, the image of the sector is also only aesthetic-driven. When media features projects with a non-aesthetic value (e.g. a piece of furniture made from recycled waste) it's often not design awards who feature the story but industry awards (e.g. from furniture manufacturers sustainability). Shouldn't those projects be selected in design awards? It would be the best way to communicate that design is not just cosmetic? A visual-only criteria reduces the definition of the designer to a form-giving actor, totally against a broader and more modern role. The sector is full of professionals who under the label designers are able to make contributions that go beyond the strict design execution, with ideas that improve the initial brief or proposals that give a decisive turn in the project. While the awards succeed evaluating the formal quality, they need to improve them so they can also judge those aspects below the visible surface. Game-changing projects, projects that change our perspective on a topic, projects that build the world to come. Following is a list of limitations of the jury process:

### **1. Limitations due to ignorance of the conditions of the brief**

- **Purpose of communication:** Knowing what you want to communicate and which is the strategy below the design can radically change the evaluation of the project, and ignoring or assuming this information we take the risk of making assuming a wrong idea.
- **Role in the project:** design as execution vs. design as a leader who leveraged the brief. In other words: whose is the main idea.
- **Budget:** time available to the project, possibility of contracting partners, availability of good pictures or typography, production, etc,
- **Cost-impact:** projects that make the most of reduced budgets vs. projects that "waste" money.
- **Design culture of client:** novice design clients vs. experienced design clients.
- **Direct communication with decision-making power:** clients with a defined hierarchy, clients with many intermediate positions, vs. clients with collective decision-making processes.
- **Time:** project timing, time available to communicate with the client and incubate ideas.
- **Sectors:** consumer goods, specialized or cultural sectors.
- **Product range:** expensive vs. cheap.

## 2. Limitations due to ignorance of the project context

1. **Cultural environment:** when cultural differences are large it is difficult to judge the value of the project on the environment.
2. **Segment of the audience addressed:** general audience vs. specific audience.
3. Educational and design culture of the public who is addressed.
4. Appropriateness to client organizational culture.

## 3. Limitations due to ignorance of the impact of projects

- **Economic Impact:** ROI, impact on brand value, etc.
- Environmental impact of paper use, emissions, use of inks or contaminated materials, production and transportation, etc.
- **Social impact:** contribution to the quality of life, change perceptions, attitudes or behaviors, attuned to culture / local values, etc.
- **Paradigm shift:** game-changing projects, changing the design of the product or the role of communication, etc.

## 4. Limitations of the presentation of projects

Although the projects sit on a table next to each other there are many factors that imbalance equal opportunities. Anyone who acted as a jury will remember the huge impact of material objects over printed images.

- **Material:** spectacular physical models vs. photographed projects.
- **Size:** large samples of product, projects submitted with many or large boards.
- **Video vs. print projects:** the perception the printed material will never have the impact of a projected video in the dark, with quality sound and large screen.
- **Assigned category:** “easy” categories vs. “difficult” categories, that is, categories with less or more competitors.
- **Fast or slow projects:** Shocking fast projects vs. complex subtle projects.
- **Well-known projects:** ads you saw on the street, known among project designers.
- Projects presented in many categories.
- Projects with a joke, a visible witty feature easy to see.
- Projects with huge budget in diverse media
- Projects whose story we know, or projects by known and respected designers.

- Projects related to a topic that we like.

## **5. Limitations to influence the vote of the group dynamics of jury**

We could add a fifth point on the dynamics of the group in the voting process. Those who have been part of a jury can probably recall a member who wanted to impose their views tirelessly and others that silently tried to avoid confrontation. Group dynamics has been largely studied by psychology, our tendency to be approved by the group gives the first opinion expresses more influencing power than the following.

## **Ideas to improve design awards**

As I admit in the beginning is not easy to improve, but after pointing out the limitations I feel obliged to point out some ideas that allow us to be optimistic.

- **Compare what is comparable:** categories according to sector (consumer, industry, science, NGOs, culture...)
- Remember that the awards are for designer-client team. Many projects do not win because the designer is only able to make the proposal but because the client is the only one in the sector who has the initiative to propose it or the courage to adopt the idea designers proposed.
- To help the jury to take into account all factors being discussed to be equal.
- Empowering the Chairman, who could remember the criteria and ensure that the voice of all members equally weighting.
- **Assess other selection processes:** without registration as Nobel prizes, where the studies are not submitted and the jury who would investigate), or the process Pritzker Architecture Prize , which calls for previous winners that provide candidates from other studies but studies do not provide any presentation.
- Create awards to complement the existing specialist. For example, awards for design proposals to transform completely the initial product.

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