An Unfortunate Incident – and if it was not? A challenge to standard rules of collaborative awards

June 15, 2020

Dear Editors of Architect, and the Awards Committee of the AIA,

The Global Design Initiative for Refugee Children, which we co-chair, was awarded the AIA 2020 Collaborative Achievement Award. This has been a great honor. Based in Boston, our collaborative group of volunteers includes architects and landscape architects; professionals, academics and students; schools, companies, NGOs, and organizations from around the world. The award is a tribute to many hours of volunteer time supporting the design and construction of playgrounds for children in precarious conditions.

The recognition of our work is due to the efforts of Stephen Gray. Stephen is a co-founder of the initiative and has dedicated significant time and resources not only to submitting the application, but also to the effort overall. Our collective work would not have been recognized without his personal dedication, and his individual contributions over the past four years have made the Initiative stronger in every way.

As part of receiving the award, we contributed to an article for Architect magazine that was published in May. There were photographs taken for the article during a March, 2020 interview that included the four of us. The published article included a rendering of the photos; Stephen had been removed. It seemed odd. When asked why this happened, it was explained that the person submitting the application cannot be the awardee. Yet our submission was for “collaborative achievement,” not for an individual. Stephen and Nathalie were planning to receive the award at the (since cancelled) AIA Conference in Los Angeles and that was not mentioned too. Following Stephen’s request, the web version of the article was promptly corrected.

To be honest, we did not think much of it. This seemed an unfortunate incident. And then, if it was not? In the related debate on social media, we learned that there has been a similar incident by the magazine in which Justin Garrett Moore -- like Stephen, a Black designer -- was edited out of a video. Really? Why? And suddenly, we realized that we might be complicit in something that we do not want to be part of.

This letter is to be clear about what this initiative is, the aspiration of our group and what we stand for. This is a collaborative effort that came out of a humanitarian crisis. Since its creation, many have contributed to the initiative in intellectual, financial, social, and other substantive ways; many have traveled to Lebanon (and elsewhere) and many have also been left out of that picture. The four of us were at that interview to present the initiative, make it visible, and represent the larger collective team.

(Please click here to see the original application, including a fuller description of our many partners and collaborating organizations.)

This letter is also to underscore the points that Stephen made when he requested that the photo and the article be corrected:

**First, the nomination process is not set up to recognize collaborative achievement.** It starts by requiring that a nominating party name a single person or firm rather than a group of collaborators. This seems antithetical to the spirit of an award for collaboration. In our field, we
tend to glorify singular personalities, even when we know that they likely only did a fraction of the actual work. That is what makes this category so refreshing, yet the existing awards process makes a collaborative submission nearly impossible.

Second, for an award based on a collaboration, all partners and protagonists should be recognized, no matter who makes the nomination. To that end, we submitted a long list of collaborators both in our nomination package and in answers to the extensive Q&A, yet none of those partners were mentioned in press announcements either. Furthermore, while Stephen made the nomination, it was for our collaborative achievement, not for one person. It seems counterintuitive, and somehow revisionist, to omit anyone involved, even if one of those collaborators is also the one nominating.

Third, with regard to the conference and awards ceremony, the AIA only offered to cover the cost of one registration and two nights in a hotel. When this was flagged, there was no acknowledgment of the inconsistency nor any attempt to resolve it so that more collaborators could attend. For non-architects or those without other incentives to attend, the cost of registration is completely prohibitive. This, once again, seems antithetical to the spirit of this award.

Suddenly, Stephen’s erasure from the publication and similar public outcry causes us to re-examine our values beyond this initiative. While this “incident” might illustrate a pattern of discrimination in selecting and editing, it certainly prompts us to look more closely at the awards process and its publication. It is an awakening. We all must speak out and cannot be by-standers. It unfortunately reflects poorly on Architect magazine, on the AIA, and on the collaborative value of the award. We expect that the on-going discussion triggered by the publication of the article and its correction will result in a more inclusive approach to future collaborative awards. We believe that as Stephen has suggested, the process of the AIA Collaborative Achievement Award -- the submission/award process itself, as well as its publication -- must shift in order to more authentically embrace the collaboration that it seeks to recognize.

We look forward to participating in this dialogue and this work, as we too strive to listen, speak up, reflect, and change.

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