

Article

Framing the Field: The Award for Sustainable Architecture

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External Editor: Volker M. Welter

Received: 30 June 2014 / Accepted: 18 March 2015 / Published: 8 April 2015

Abstract: In this paper, we explore the effect that the increasingly powerful discourse of sustainability is having on the field of architecture. The term “field” derives from Bourdieu’s conceptualization of fields as dynamic spaces of social relations tending towards transformation or conservation. While the overlapping fields of sustainability and architecture have historically been characterized by resistance, shifts in environmental discourse towards complexity and systems thinking and the inclusion of cultural, social, political and economic concerns within the broader mandate of sustainability signal a more synergistic ideological terrain. We use methods of narrative analysis to explore these shifts through the localized discourse of the award for sustainable architecture within the Australian context and offer a brief comparative analysis of the sustainable architecture awards discourse in Britain and North America. As arguably the most public elucidations of the profession’s ideology, architecture awards are a productive place in which to explore constructions of “sustainable architecture”. The narrative analysis reveals a trajectory towards assimilation supported by the positioning of sustainability as fundamentally a social, as well as an environmental practice. Contentions surrounding the ultimate disappearance of the award, however, reveal a more perverse relationship between sustainability and architecture.

Keywords: sustainability; architecture; awards; Bourdieu; discourse

1. Introduction

The imperative of “sustainability” now pervades almost every aspect of architectural discourse and production. Architecture has a long history of addressing social and environmental concerns, which can now broadly be classified under the banner of sustainability. Nevertheless, as with most other disciplines, the last twenty years have seen an intensification of the debate concerning the relationship between humans and our environment and an increasing sophistication in strategies to mediate our impacts. This has resulted in substantive shifts in architectural practice, including the development of niche areas of expertise in, for example, thermal modelling, environmental consulting and participatory design, as well as transformations in the design and construction of built works in response to building regulations, rating tools and the increasing array of eco-materials and technologies.

In this paper, however, we are interested in exploring how sustainability affects the entire field of architecture. The term “field” here is deliberately used to describe an ideological rather than professional terrain in relation to the practice of architecture. The term derives from Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of fields as dynamic spaces of social relations. While external limits to fields do exist in the form of institutionalised “barriers to entry” [1] (p. 39), it is the internal criteria of success, or “symbolic capital”, that defines the field. Symbolic capital, unlike economic capital, eludes a clear definition, since it does not exist as a material good with a universally-recognised value. Symbolic capital, rather, is that which is “*misrecognised ... as capital*” [2] (p. 112). It has no value outside of the field in which it operates and is only open to revaluation by those within the field. Thus, it is arbitrary, yet durable, invisible and denied.

In this way, the field can be seen as a dynamic field of forces tending to either transformation or conservation [3]. Defining the limits of a field is part of the struggle of the field itself. When a new discourse enters the field, even if individual positions are not changed, the space of possibilities is transformed, and thus, the whole field is transformed. Yet, as Stevens [4] argues, in order for a new movement to gain credence within a field, support from key individuals and institutions is required. This situation would appear to deny the potential for truly radical breaks with tradition, since one would have to uphold a tradition before one could break it; however, this is contingent on the relative autonomy of the field and the consequent power balance between symbolic and economic capital [3].

Architecture, as primarily a design profession, exhibits a relatively weak knowledge territory caused by an imbalance between tacit and objective knowledge and is open to colonisation by others outside of the profession [5]. Thus, the autonomy of the field is ideological, rather than practical. Architects are not the only designers of buildings, but they are the asserted exclusive producers of “architecture”, and it is this very conflation of the terms “architect” and “architecture” on which the profession is predicated [6] (p. 16). Nevertheless, the field of architecture does not sustain itself in isolation. Built works are a necessary condition of practice, both economically and ideologically. Given the increased complexity of the design and procurement of built works and the consequent involvement of a great number of stakeholders, any claims to an ideology of autonomy in the construction of “architecture” might seem untenable. As Larson [7] and Cuff [5] observe, however, as the gap between ideology and practice increases, so does the significance of the myth.

In the context of this durable symbolic foundation, what effect is the increasingly powerful discourse of sustainability having on the field? The practice of sustainable architecture has been

described as trying to serve two masters in the context of a future ideal state where sustainability and architecture are undifferentiated [8]. This results in a paradoxical condition where sustainability is simultaneously conceptualised as being both an inherent part of architecture and as being a separable aspect of it [8]. The extent to which the framing of sustainable architecture moves towards the extremities of oxymoron or tautology is subject to the framing of the field of sustainability itself.

Unlike architecture, sustainability is not a field that encompasses institutional boundaries of practice, although an increasing variety of emerging professions may now broadly be included within this territory. The field has a strong base in environmental science and has been criticised for its narrow, mechanistic and instrumental understanding of the world and human-environment relations. Shifts in environmental discourse towards complexity and systems thinking, as well as the inclusion of cultural, social, political and economic concerns, open the field up to a much wider terrain and challenge both the epistemological and ontological foundations of the field.

This re-conceptualization of sustainability, as an inclusive, dynamic paradigm, has been embraced within the fields of architecture and urban design. If sustainable architecture is considered a movement or style, it risks becoming superseded. Moore [9] writes that the demand for a new movement is persistent, but this cycle of deconstruction and reconstruction is self-defeating. To make a declaration for the new requires “the dramatic death of what precedes” [9] (p. 10). Hartman [10] (p. 140) argues that sustainability “is more than just another ‘ism’, and while Modernism (and Postmodernism) may have had their day, an architecture that addresses scarcity is surely here to stay”. Such declarations about an enduring “sustainable” future for architecture are more palatable in the context of a malleable framing of the field of sustainability itself. A number of sustainability researchers conceive of sustainability as an evolving, flexible, continuous, heuristic concept of urban change that responds to changes in the environment [11–15]. Further, as Guy and Moore [16] contend, since attempts to define singular conceptions of sustainability and sustainable architecture are futile, we should instead delight in the diversity of possible meanings and practices.

Guy and Moore’s premise is not a permissive relativism, but rather a plea for an interrogation of the field and the multiplicity and fluidity of ideologies and practices through critical discourse. While we support this position, our interest here is in exploring whether and how this diversity and fluidity is transforming the entire field. Our view is necessarily partial and limited. As a dynamic and contested space, the field necessarily resists any framing of its boundaries; no singular discourse can define the field. There are, however, certain discourses that provide valuable insights into the symbolic shifts that operate in the field, and here, we turn to the architecture awards as the narrative setting for this inquiry. Following an overview of the role and function of awards within the field of architecture, we turn to a detailed analysis of the discourse within the Australian National Architecture Awards over the last twenty years. While the research is situated within the Australian context and is necessarily influenced by the particularities of place, the conditions of professional practice are common and informed as much by discourses of architecture and sustainability that operate globally, rather than locally. This is particularly the case in relation to Britain and North America, and we offer a brief comparative analysis of the sustainable architecture awards discourse in these contexts. We conclude by reflecting on the contentions surrounding the position of sustainability as a distinct category within the awards and critique the implications of the idealized trajectory towards assimilation.

2. The Narrative Setting: Architecture Awards

Architecture awards, conferred by the various professional institutes, are arguably the most public elucidations of the values and criteria of success that underpin the construction of “architecture”. They are a key component of what Larson [17] (p. 8) terms the “discursive center” of professions through which the socialised distinction between architecture and building is sustained. While architectural discourse has been criticised for perpetuating the myth of autonomy [5,18], it is also a mechanism by which change may occur in the field of architecture. Although the awards are situated firmly within the professional boundaries of the field through institutionalised “barriers to entry”, their symbolic authority is invested in the judging panel. Larson [17] (p. 182) describes the awards as “exercises of autonomous authority, by which the symbolic gatekeepers of each specialized field try to pre-empt the judgment of outsiders with their own”.

This dominant autonomous function of the architecture awards is evidenced by the dissemination of the discourse primarily within the professional journals. Nevertheless, there is another important aspect to the awards that extends beyond the boundaries of the profession to the heteronomous context in which architecture is inevitably situated. The position of autonomy granted to a profession is not automatic, but is a condition of a social contract by which all professions are bound [7] (p. xii). In this way, it is vital that there is some degree of congruence between the values of the profession and those of society to ensure the continued autonomy of the profession. Larson [17] (p. 182) describes this public function of the awards as a “feedback link” in which desirable architectural qualities are revealed to potential future clients.

The public and autonomous functions of the awards are not mutually distinct entities competing in divergent ideological territories. The complexities of the awards reflect the complexities of the field of architecture as a dynamic space in which the symbolic stakes are continually negotiated and reconstructed. As new discourses, such as the contemporary sustainability debate, enter the field, the entire field is transformed as the space of possibilities is expanded.

In this paper, we explore the shifts in the field through the localized discourse of the award for sustainable architecture within the Australian National Architecture Awards. The national awards, established in 1981, represent the highest accolade for architecture in Australia, with premiated works selected from among the state award winners. Two high-profile figures lent their names to the foundational, and arguably the most highly-prized, awards: the Sir Zelman Cowen Award for new public buildings and the Robin Boyd Award for housing. The current suite of awards comprises a further three awards related to building classifications—residential alterations and additions, multiple housing and commercial architecture—and eight other awards for heritage, interior design, urban design, small projects, sustainable architecture, enduring architecture (for buildings older than 25 years), international architecture (for projects undertaken by Australian architects overseas) and Colorbond steel (recognising the major sponsor of the architecture awards in Australia). In comparison with the state awards, the national awards have remained relatively static in diversity and few in number, supporting their elite status. Juries are also encouraged to limit awards to one per category to avoid any tendency to “trivialise the process” [19] (p. 54).

While judgements of merit are inherently subjective, in order to assuage any propensity for bias and provide a degree of objectivity and transparency, juries are provided with a discrete set of “evaluation

criteria” against which all entries are assessed. These current evaluation criteria, in order, comprise: conceptual framework, public and cultural benefits, the relationship of the built form to context, program resolution, integration of allied disciplines, cost/value outcome, sustainability and response to client and user needs. As the late revered architect, Neville Quarry, however, argues, to term these areas “criteria” is misleading, since they “lack the embodiment of a standard”, leaving the jury to rely only on its “ingrained professional judgement” with “consensus arrived at by debate” [19] (pp. 9–11).

This leaves the jury in a very powerful position and risks the introduction of jury bias. Certainly, juries can and have been appointed to reflect a particular ideological position [20]. In the national awards, the risk of individual bias is restrained by maintaining five individuals on the jury panel, including one non-architect [19] (p. 10). Nevertheless, with the overwhelming dominance of architects over “laypersons”, the Institute’s stated preference for these architects to be eminent members of the profession, and with the jury panel consistently chaired by the immediate past president of the Institute, preservation of relatively mainstream architectural ideologies is ensured [19].

This has led to some criticism of the architecture awards system for failing to capture the full diversity of architectural practices or positions in Australia. As Van Schaik and Clark argue, the awards system “normalizes and merges opinion” in a “smoothing process” [21] (p. 86). There is an undeniable, and arguably inevitable, tendency towards ‘narrative smoothing’ in the awards—the censoring of material that does not fit with the preferred narrative. This is a condition of the institutionalised context in which the awards are situated and raises the question of whether the more subtle influence of the narrator across the awards, generally, undermines the ability for the awards to genuinely reflect architectural practice in Australia. While we recognise the limits of the discourse within the awards to reflect both the diversity of practice and positions, they nevertheless provide the most visible indicator of a collective ideology and are thus useful in exploring how sustainability affects the entire field of architecture.

The paper uses a narrative methodology to interpret and represent field texts. Field texts gathered for this study, including jury citations and discourse in the media, are reconstructed into a reflective and analytic research text by continually asking questions concerning meaning and significance [22]. The objective of narrative analysis is to critically reflect on and interpret field texts to create narratives that emphasise significant events or concerns and incorporate reflexive and alternative explanations. The initial stage of narrative analysis in this research used three key narrative coding techniques: thematic, structural and dialogic/performance analysis. The thematic analysis focused on narrative content, identifying key thematic elements, and significant events revealed in the field texts through repetition, overlap between different sources, contradiction and emphasis placed by authors. Structural analysis interrogated how field texts were organised and language was employed to achieve the narrator’s intentions. Dialogic/performance coding attended to how the texts were dialogically produced and performed in the space between teller and listener, speaker and setting, text and reader and history and culture [23]. The following analysis references stories from varied sources to create a research text that recognises the significance of audience and narrator, context, continuity over time and rhetorical devices.

3. Judging Sustainability

The Institute launched the inaugural “Citation for Environmental Issues” as part of the 1993 national awards, affirming and formalising the field’s commitment to sustainability following the signing of the Declaration of Interdependence at the International Union of Architects World Congress in the same year. Only one year later, the awards jury is boldly able to declare the emergence of an ideological shift:

Architecture’s fulcrum seems to be shifting towards a disposition of responsibility. While no paradigms of virtue can be claimed yet, many projects honoured in this year’s RAIA National Architecture Awards are sensitive responses to local climates and cultures, and concerned with the health of the planet. Rejecting some extravagant declarations of style, the jury rewards the recycling of historic structures, natural ventilation systems, and new buildings precisely made with modest materials [24] (p. 38).

A perceived disposition of “irresponsibility” (style) is seen to be moving towards a disposition of “responsibility” (sustainability). While stopping short of declaring a “paradigm shift” in values, there is an evident affirmation of a trajectory towards a symbolic transformation of the entire field.

The dominant rhetoric within the discourse of the awards in 1993 and 1994 is one of unity between architecture and sustainability; however, a sub-text reveals certain conflicts between the two. In 1993, the jury noted the economic impediments to the integration of sustainability initiatives in commercial projects with their reference to the “hard-basket issues of ecological sustainability” [25] (p. 34). Perhaps more problematic for the emerging field of sustainable architecture, the 1994 jury statement acknowledges the perceived conflicts that exist between environmental sensitivity and creative freedom. The winner of the Environment Citation in this year, the Advanced Technology Centre by Jackson Teece Chesterman Willis, is lauded as a “highly efficient and attractive building” in the face of the environmental requirements, which others might have considered “a restriction on the creative process” [24] (p. 64). Here, sustainability has no symbolic value, but is rather positioned as a set of external factors that must be navigated, with some difficulty, in the production of works of architecture.

This is reflected in the jury’s definition of the role of the Environment Citation in the awards, which recognises both the scope of “measures” taken to “achieve ecological sustainable design” and their “special integration” in the building [24] (p. 64). Sustainability is definable and bounded, measurable and realisable, whereas architecture emerges in the exceptional, the unique and in the capacity to assimilate.

The apparent symbolic discord that exists between sustainability and architecture in the early to mid-1990s is a condition of the relatively restrictive definition of sustainability in relation to environmental factors, such as energy and water efficiency, materials and waste management. Later described as a “menu” [26] (p. 81), these ingredients for sustainability can be listed and quantified. Their subsequent translation into the “Ecologically Sustainable Development Award Checklist and Energy Award Checklist” (npd) reinforced structural differences by introducing an assessment process founded on objectivity and transparency, in stark contrast to the necessarily subjective and opaque discourse that valorises works as “architecture”.

Notwithstanding such ideological and structural differences, sustainability appears to regain a firmer footing with its elevation to award status in 1999 as the Ecologically Sustainable Design (ESD)/Energy Efficient Design (EED) Award, followed by an implicit expansion of criteria in its renaming as the “Award for Sustainable Architecture” in 2002. Notably, in 2000, the Institute honoured three projects in addition to the main award winner in this category, positioning Australian architecture and architects at the centre of sustainable practice internationally by revealing “just how imaginative, lateral and varied Australian ESD EED approaches can be” [27] (p. 34).

There is an interesting, and arguably not coincidental, correlation between the public media saturation on sustainability in the year of the Sydney Olympics and the similarly extensive scope of the sustainable architecture award in this year, pointing to the importance of the public function of the Institute’s architecture awards. Heralded as the “green games”, the Olympics generated a wealth of projects with explicit environmental agendas. The award-winning project in the following year by Ryder Associates for the Sydney Olympic Velodrome is celebrated as an exemplar of sustainable architecture, uniting form and function in a bold and novel aesthetic:

The building’s evocative but simple form recalls a cyclist’s helmet, and the architect has used this Taurean geometry to benefit the requirement for a passively ventilated space. A suite of natural ventilation and lighting concepts has been successfully integrated into the architecture of the building with considerable skill.... The jury was impressed with the success of the architect’s original vision in the making of a huge naturally ventilated and lit entertainment and sporting centre [28] (p. 56).

Here, the jurors applaud the architects not only for their consideration of energy-efficient lighting and passive ventilation strategies, but also for the seamless integration of these strategies into the architectural form. The passive ventilation in particular becomes a generator for the architectural idea and responds to the ideal of creative genius as an “original vision” of the architect.

This implicit symbolic repositioning of sustainability gained ground in the late 1990s and early 2000s with a number of projects celebrated for their imaginative formal responses. The 1999 award-winning entry by Pavilion Architects for the animal pavilions at Homebush Bay, also for the Sydney Olympics, was described by the jury as “both functional and arresting, notably in the fabric up-draft shafts suspended in the interiors”, with a “festive note deriving from their uncommon aesthetic” [29] (p. 63). Thus, the building design reflects the core ideology of the field of architecture in maintaining aesthetic difference, described by the jury as “ecomodernism for the new millennium” for combining new technologies with vernacular forms [29] (p. 63).

While sustainable architecture retains some connection with its historical roots in the vernacular, the language is primarily future-oriented and experimental. The discourse reflects the concurrent groundswell of interest in sustainable architecture in a movement labelled “eco-tech” [30] and “organi-tech” [31] led by international “starchitects”, such as Richard Rogers, Norman Foster, Renzo Piano and Nicholas Grimshaw. This positioning is even more explicit in the 2003 sustainable jury citation for Robert Morris-Nunn and Associates’ Forest Ecocentre, described as “suggestive of Future System’s ‘offices in a bubble’” [26] (p. 70).

Both eco-tech and vernacular imagery persist as aesthetic typologies for green architecture, and their manifestation in the national architecture awards is conspicuous. Nevertheless, the discourse

reveals enduring tensions between these contrasting “images” of green architecture. “Good” principles of passive solar design inspired by vernacular typologies are sensible inclusions, but do not constitute the “strength” of the architectural concept [32] (p. 62), whereas those with a “playful architectural aesthetic” must defend their position as “serious” sustainable architecture [33] (p. 76).

“Imaging” green architecture is contentious, encompassing both ideological questions over the value of aesthetics to the field and confronting stigmas of a narrowly-defined style [34]. The field of architecture maintains authority over aesthetic “judgments”, and the marginalisation of an overt vernacular style, conceptualized as “nuts and berries”, is persistent; however, the broader value of aesthetics in relation to a sustainability imperative is more tenuous. One solution lies in claiming architecture’s didactic role:

Our approach to the project has been to extend the demonstrative potential of architecture to be visually instructive within a context of an ESD project without defaulting to a nuts and berry aesthetic [35] (p. 76).

This “demonstrative potential” of architecture is explicit in numerous citations in the period 2004–2011, with a notable dominance of public and educational buildings. This has the dual advantage of reinforcing architecture’s contribution to a sustainability agenda without undermining the symbolic foundation of the field.

The preoccupation with the image of green architecture is enduring. This was manifest most explicitly in the 2007 awards, where the diversity of sustainability practices was celebrated with an unprecedented four awards in the sustainable category. The University of Tasmania School of Architecture is recognized for its “restraint” in the context of an implicit criticism of the indulgence of eco-tech “bling”, while Council House 2 (CH2) is celebrated for its “whimsy” in the application of environmental features, such as “shower towers” and “brightly coloured rotating turbines” [36] (pp. 108–109). The overt expression of these sustainable features on CH2 is applauded for its broad educational potential, whereas the design of Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE Block B is commended for the “seamless incorporation of sustainable measures into the architectural expression ... which could be enjoyed in isolation of this issue” [36] (p. 110). Yet, the commonality amongst the apparent diversity is the continued emphasis on the relationship between sustainability and architectural expression, a preoccupation that perpetuates into the next decade.

There are, however, evident changes in the discourse at this time signaling a more expansive space for green architecture. First is a shift in emphasis from product to process. Of the four awarded projects in 2007, the jury identifies collaborative practice as “the clearest future direction in the intersection of commercial practice, design agendas and a desire to minimize environmental impact” [36] (p. 111). This is perhaps an explicit acknowledgement that business, architecture and sustainability are inherently ideologically distinct. Thus, while they might be integrated through a process of consultation and collaboration, “success” is contingent upon the capacity for the project to be “directed and curated by the sure hand of the lead architect” [36] (p. 111).

A second trajectory towards the assimilation of sustainability within architecture is a more carefully considered the language for sustainable architecture, where a “thermal wall” can be transformed as a “façade of light”, abandoning the language of science for a more familiar architectural lexicon. Most

significantly, however, is the implied claim to a much more substantial and secure heritage for sustainable architecture as revealed in the citation for SQUIT Block B:

The project included a nod to Hertzberger and also to the tradition of Public Works projects ... Thus, the building is an exemplar of future practice and a trip down memory lane—reminding us that these issues have been solved before and that a greater awareness of this history would stand the profession in good stead [36] (p. 110).

Here, the history of sustainable architecture is shifted away from its “nuts and berries” foundation in the vernacular and early “eco-architecture” and instead repositioned within a more substantive and familiar social lineage in architecture. While implicit in the awards discourse for more than a decade, the term “social sustainability” appears in the national awards citations for the first time in 2011. This is coupled with an evident shift in focus away from environmental impact to questions of amenity, health and social equity.

Repositioning sustainability as fundamentally a social, as well as an environmental practice enables a more synergistic alignment of ideologies [8]. It is perhaps no coincidence, therefore, that the discourse in the 2007 awards simultaneously celebrates the breadth and depth of practices in sustainability and heralds the demise of the award. The implicit reference to the social dimension of sustainability and the consequent claiming of an established architectural canon, together with the affirmation of integrated practice as a “model” for the future, leads the jury to propose that “... the need for a reminder via our awards programme of the importance of minimizing environmental impact is nearly at an end” [36] (p. 111). While not denying the importance of environmental sustainability, this is not seen to be the core of architectural practice. The role of the architect is the “sure hand” in guiding the expert consultants in the integration of environmental initiatives. Only the social dimension of sustainability remains firmly within the territory of the architect.

Sustainability, in this broader social definition, thus presents an opportunity for the field of architecture to reclaim a now languishing professional status. In an editorial in the 2003 awards edition of *Architecture Australia*, David Parken, the CEO of the Institute, calls for architects to “take on the mantle of leadership”. Recognizing the importance of the architecture awards as both a mechanism of “public display” for the values of architecture, as well as an internal register of the field’s broader social position, he argues:

... the RAIA awards a decade from now will bear only passing resemblance to those of 2003.... The Award for Sustainable Architecture, for example, will be redundant ... projects won’t even be considered for awards unless they demonstrate a measurable commitment to principles of sustainability [37] (p. 11).

The award for sustainable architecture has always occupied a position of uncertainty. It has been described as “schizophrenic”, implying that the profession not only has a split identity, but that these identities cannot be properly integrated [38]. Resolution of this paradoxical condition lies in a future ideal state where sustainability permeates the field and the award for sustainable architecture becomes redundant. In an article in *Architecture Australia* in 2010, the field of architecture is declared to have reached this state of maturity where “sustainable architecture” can no longer be distinguishable from “good architecture”. The sustainability category is described as anachronistic, since the broad range of concerns considered under the sustainability headline is now “widely accepted to form the basis of any

definition of good design” [39] (p. 117). Further, it is argued that the continuance of the sustainability award introduces a binary that implies projects from other categories would be “unsustainable”, which is “an obvious nonsense” [39] (p. 117).

In 2010, the Institute's National Council established the Sustainability Award Working Group (SAWG) to review the scope and position of the sustainability award. Founded on a perception that the award was too narrowly focused on technical aspects and “green bling”, the parameters of sustainable design were deliberately expanded to include a focus on long-term gains, aesthetics, environmental, economic, social and cultural dimensions of sustainability and integrated design at the individual and urban scale [40].

While there has been an explicit focus on the need to forge a more unified sustainability agenda for the profession since the mid-2000s and an evident shift away from an explicit dialogue about sustainability and environmental credentials within the awards in the previous two years, the last decade has not seen the kind of radical transformation anticipated and advocated by Parken or the demise of the award for sustainable architecture. The working group recommended that the award be retained, but elevated to a named award to be selected from entries across all categories. Criteria were to be open ended, the checklist for sustainability initiatives abandoned and a “preamble”, outlining intent in relation to environmental, social and economic sustainability initiatives, required for all entries in all categories.

Does this repositioning of the award for sustainable architecture indicate that the “split identity” of the field has been reconciled? Concerns may be raised about the lack of “measureable” commitment to sustainability in this framework: a perceived permissiveness in which the symbolic capital in the field of architecture subsumes and silences a more radical sustainability agenda. There are risks and opportunities of this repositioning of the award for sustainable architecture. In the future, if an idealized position of integration is realized, it may disappear; however, since the awards do not “speak” to the field alone, this will inevitably be balanced by a perceived value of the award in sustaining the image of the profession in the public realm.

While this paper focuses on the Australian context, here, we briefly examine the discourse in Britain and the United States to understand if similar trends have permeated the field internationally. We examine the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) National Awards and the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Committee on the Environment (COTE) Top Ten awards.

The RIBA briefly introduced a national sustainability award in 2007 only to withdraw it in 2009, “ceding to the view that every building honoured by an RIBA accolade should have a strong sustainability agenda” [41] (n.p). In order to ensure that this is the case, a new process has been introduced to vet the environmental performance of the Stirling Prize “mid-list” projects and a sustainability statement introduced as part of the awards submission process. Hartman [42] observes that sustainability is “increasingly embedded” in British architecture, but she believes it is still necessary for the national awards to recognize exemplary sustainability projects in order to drive change (as the RIBA regional awards continue to do). Her view is seemingly reinforced by the profession as demonstrated by the result of an Architects’ Journal (AJ) reader poll in 2012 that revealed 87 percent of respondents supported the introduction of a national sustainability award.

Analysis of architectural discourse in Britain reveals a move away from explicit expressions of sustainability in a similar manner to that seen in Australia. Hartman [43], the AJ sustainability editor,

commends the King's School in Worcester, because "nothing that is visible inside or out hints that this is one of the greenest buildings of the year" (n.p). Hartman describes 2011 RIBA award shortlisted projects as taking a "holistic" approach, where sustainability was "embedded in the design brief from the outset" [41] (n.p). The U.K. context reveals a similar expansion of the conception of sustainability. Murray [44] writes that the AJ "take a broad definition of sustainability that extends beyond energy efficiency to include buildings that are adaptable, built-to-last, socially and economically responsible and, finally, well-designed places and spaces for people" (n.p). If sustainability is fundamentally about designing interactions between people and places, this has strong resonance with the field of architecture. Nevertheless, fears remain over the loss of the visibility of sustainability within the awards and architectural discourse more broadly. As Hartman [45] (n.p) contends, if sustainability is not explicitly championed, it can be easily overlooked or "value-engineered out".

In the United States, a similar discussion emerges about the redundancy of the sustainability awards. It is the aspiration that the COTE awards will be eliminated [46] and discussion surrounding the 2011 awards suggested that "Projects that satisfy COTE requirements should not be exceptions—they should be the rule" [46]. Hartman [41] notes that the COTE Top Ten awards were intended to be temporary, to be withdrawn when sustainability was demonstrably embedded in building design. The implication of their continuation (the 2014 awards were recently conferred) suggests a perception that sustainability is not yet sufficiently deeply-rooted within architectural practice.

The AIA COTE Top Ten awards jury citations from 2014 reveal a similar rhetoric to recent Australian and British architectural discourse. Social sustainability is emphasized and neighbourhood/community-scale response promoted; environmental terminology is less prominent; and the term "integrated" or "embedded" is often repeated [47]. A winning project was commended because it "dissolved the boundary between landscape and building, and addressed entire neighbourhoods" [46] (n.p), which resonates with the jury citations for Heller Street Housing, a recipient of an Australian sustainability award. Jury comments on the 355 11th Street project included a discussion about how buildings can become a catalyst for a "larger cultural idea about sustainability" [48] (n.p). A shift away from explicit representations of sustainability is also evident in recent COTE Top Ten projects. One of the 2013 winners is commended for how effective the building has been at avoiding the "standard stigma of what a responsible building is" [48] (n.p), and in 2014, the jury praised projects that "integrated high-performance design elements in sophisticated, thought-out ways that didn't scream 'green'" [49] (n.p). Endorsements for more nuanced, expanded and understated expressions of sustainability appear to have permeated the wider field.

4. Discussion

This paper has investigated the relationship between sustainability and architecture through the lens of the Australian National Architecture Awards. Narrative analysis of the awards discourse suggests that the selection of projects, the language in the awards citations and the changing name of the award tell a story of a trajectory towards assimilation. This is also reflected in the awards discourse in Britain and North America. In particular, the framing of sustainability as a social practice enables both a stronger alignment of ideologies and a more assured claim for territory; if architecture is the

“quintessential social art” [50] (p. 27), designing places for people is a fundamental condition of the field. The ultimate goal is the disappearance of the award as the field matures and “sustainable architecture” becomes tantamount to “good architecture”. Yet, the resistance to its erasure in Australia and the United States and calls for its reinstatement in the United Kingdom suggests that the field has not yet reached this position of maturity. While the award for sustainability is important in maintaining the visibility of the field’s commitment and contribution to sustainability in the public domain, sustainability proponents also remain fearful of co-option: the disappearance of the award may simultaneously signal the disappearance of sustainability. At the same time, the visibility of sustainability is also problematic. If it is seen as a movement, it risks disappearance in the continual cycle of reinvention of the new. If sustainable architecture is “here to stay”, it must permeate the field as symbolic currency.

Does this require the ultimate disappearance of the award for sustainable architecture? Here, we would like to offer a different story of resistance to the trajectory of disappearance, which speaks not to a fear of co-option, but rather to the substantiation of symbolic currency. We argue that calls for the disappearance of the award for sustainable architecture are not indicative of a maturing of the field and an idealized moment of assimilation, but rather, point to a more perverse relationship between sustainability and architecture. It suggests a conceptualization of sustainability as something that is known, fixed and bounded: a “truth” that is universally-recognized and undisputed. Sustainability, in this narrow sense, can be subsumed in a process of normalization, and there is already evidence of this through, for example, the codification of mandatory performance standards; however, it does not point to a reconciliation of the “split identity” of the field. Rather, it suggests that sustainability is ideologically mute.

Conversely, if we are to embrace sustainability as an uncertain, dynamic and fluid terrain, then this requires debate, and it is here that its symbolic currency lies. The contention that the perpetuation of the award for sustainable architecture renders everything outside its boundaries “unsustainable” is an implicit and invisible denial of its symbolic potential: a categorization of sustainability as something “other”. It speaks of exclusion rather than inclusion.

If “sustainable” architecture is, by definition, “good” architecture, then its visibility in architectural discourse is vital. The award for sustainable architecture is an opportunity for the field to engage in critical discourse, to both celebrate the diversity of practices and question the scope of possible meanings and the implications for the field of architecture. In this context, we concur with Van Schaik and Clark [21], who argue that it is the collective responsibility of the architecture profession to tell more complex stories through the vehicle of the architecture awards. While we must recognize and resist the tendency for “narrative smoothing”, we contend that critical discourse about sustainability within the core valorising mechanism of the field has the capacity to catalyse new ideas in architecture.

Author Contributions

Ceridwen Owen was largely responsible for the theoretical framing and structure of the paper, background on the Australian architecture awards and the paper’s narrative. Jen Lorrimar-Shanks was largely responsible for the narrative analysis of the awards discourse, the Methodology Section, the international comparison, referencing and formatting of the paper.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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