

Opening Speech on the occasion of the City of Toronto's 2005 Architecture and Urban Design Awards

To begin with, I know nothing about architecture, except that I have been walking in and out of it all my life. I am a poet, and only know that the principles of poetry are the principles of life, and the principles of life are the principles of architecture and design; welcome, beauty, exhilaration, passion, music, and a general tendency to uplift the spirit of the human to a level of hope; and a sense that heaven is on earth, at least a little bit.

Urban design. What can be said? It is beautiful in Toronto. So many statements of individuation and so little regard to what goes on around them! Fortunately, the Architecture and Urban Design Awards are a gorgeous incentive to set a standard for the poetry that the human body walks through; for that's what urban design is-- visual poetry-- physical poetry; it encompasses all the senses, and is the most totalistic of all the arts; for there is no "watching", or reading, or listening, or being just a spectator in the art of urban design; the citizen "becomes" the art, joins the art, walks through it, lives in it-- completes the art, as the lover for which the design was intended. And the design must love the citizen. It is the only way the citizen believes the design, by an intuition that the intent and vision was a romance intended for him.

In fact this is where the romance of a city begins (in a world where cities are hunting for passion). It begins in the romance of feeling "at home"; not in a "comfort" sense. It's the romance that one's bones and conversation, one's voice and acoustic, one's sense of play, visual and purposed, has found its proper forum in whatever building and scenario the city offers. This is the beautiful -- to feel invited and to be willing to surrender one's physicality to what is graceful and good, because it does not fight human dimension, but gives it new horizons within the scope of the familiar. This is home, the sense that urban design is "right" and that it concurs mellifluously with what surrounds it.

Let me extend my innocence on the subject a bit further. It strikes me that what Toronto has in abundance is buildings that either just 'do the job", or try to impress the hell out of you. Neither category catches the interest of the Architecture and Urban Design Awards; but as I look through the awarded designs of previous years, I notice one aspect that seems essential to the criteria of excellence of the AUDA; philosophically, it's an important aspect-- and it's very simply the notion of "welcome"; the notion that a design must "welcome" its inhabitant or visitor, through the strange alchemy of imagination and benevolence, through a sense of generosity in the spirit of the artist. Perhaps because the architect loves the citizen, the mark of welcome is in each and every awarded design.

And this is crucial, not just as a principle of design, but as a corroboration of a city's ethic. An ethic of welcome that cannot first be extended to its citizens by architecture, cannot be extended to visitors or present a city to the world as an auspicious place to explore. When we feel "welcome" in our structures, we are at home, at ease and prone to be creative, and that "buzz" of creative and rejoiced ambience is felt, and passed on; and

a city that is too big in many, many ways is then bonded, made to cohere by an atmosphere of conviviality and trust. Yes, even trust. Because to be able to entrust one's body to a building, to a street, to a home, is then to be able to entrust oneself to other people, is to be able to entrust oneself to the civic.

So it is that the good urban design is a gift to a city's ethic; and that is why these awards are premiere appreciation. Good designs do not just enhance the quality of individual and collective activity; they inspire a city to act as it would present itself.

Allow me to congratulate tonight's awardees in advance, and to suggest to all those architects who are here in the spirit of excellence, that the landscape of the global city is in their hands, and consequently, the enthusiasm of an entire city for a passionate quality of life.

Pier Giorgio Di Cicco
City of Toronto Poet Laureate