

COLUMNS

DEC/10 The Design Awards Issue: Design Pittsburgh 2010 award winners
From Suburban Sprawl to a Sustainable Future: Solutions for the Route 51 Corridor |
Design Pittsburgh event photos | AIA Pittsburgh, a chapter of the American Institute of Architects

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HOMEFRONT

BY ANNE J. SWAGER, HON. AIA



I was deeply honored to receive a special citation from AIA President George Miller, FAIA recognizing my 20 years of service to AIA Pittsburgh at the Design Pittsburgh celebration. The icing on the cake was the faux cover of Pittsburgh Magazine with my photo and tributes on it which was presented to me by publisher Betsy Benson. My 14 year old daughter, Ellen, thought it was real and told her lunch table at school that my face would be appearing in their mailboxes soon. I know she is deeply embarrassed at her mistake but since 14 year olds don't even like to acknowledge that they have parents, I am deeply touched that she even mentioned me to her friends.

Since the award was a surprise, I did not have any prepared remarks to make and, in retrospect, this might explain why it was a surprise... nevertheless, I snuck a few words in. The gist of what I said was that the AIA was a "team sport." I have worked with a number of bright, thoughtful, motivated people whether they were on the Board of Directors, a volunteer, or on the staff. My most successful approach has been to get out of the way. If you put the right people in the right places, amazing things can happen. It is so gratifying to work for and with a profession that is forward thinking, creative, and mostly optimistic.

While that personal recognition was certainly a high note for me, I also had an equally rewarding experience participating in the recent Route 51 SDAT project. I have spent most of my 30 years in the South Hills avoiding Route 51. Driving it is hands down one of the most unpleasant experiences you can have behind the wheel of your car. The road winds, narrows, and is most often congested. Abandoned buildings, large billboards, retail big box, and a worn out mall are just a small part of

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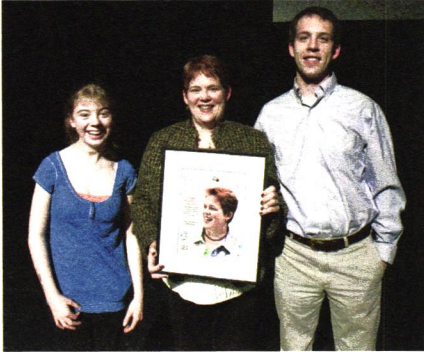


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the varying road conditions. Early in 2010, we learned that the Route 51 corridor from the Liberty Tubes to the Elizabeth Bridge had been chosen for study by a Sustainable Design Assistance Team. Jen Bee, AIA and an intrepid group of unemployed architects donated countless hours to preparing a map of current road conditions for the team. They also were present to help sketch the ideas that were generated during the team visit and to handle a myriad of other details that need attention when you bring a team of experts to town.

What was particularly gratifying was to see the sketches of how Route 51 could work. There were ideas for quick fixes, medium ones, and long term solutions. The team was able to grasp the importance of some of our biggest issues like sewage overflow and explain how changes to the road could positively impact runoff, saving the bordering townships many, many thousands of dollars. I can't possibly do justice to the outcome of the three day visit. To see for yourself go to <http://www.aia.org/aiaucmp/groups/aia/documents/pdf/aiab086243.pdf>. I saw nods from many of the people who attended the final presentation. Maybe it was my imagination but I felt that there was a hopefulness in the room. Some of the solutions were relatively simple but powerful nonetheless.

The year has been challenging to all of you in the profession and to those of us who work to support you. Celebrations like Design Pittsburgh help to remind us what can be accomplished. In spite of these difficult times, I see reason to hope that the economy is turning around and that good design remains a vital part of the future of our region. If you aren't part of the team, join us. There are always opportunities for fresh thinking and energetic effort. 



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CARS, CARS, CARS

BY KEVIN WAGSTAFF, AIA

Cars get blamed for a lot in the design community, and much of it is well deserved. Our auto-centric built environments are often ugly and inhospitable, almost never beautiful. Nevertheless, cars are just too practical and convenient for most people to give up. Few of us could do business or raise a family without one. I believe personal transportation is here to stay, which makes efforts such as the Route 51 SDAT, spearheaded by Jen Bee, AIA, so important. We need to learn how to design good environments that include the car. Turning things around, perhaps we can even learn something from car design and engineering.



I actually like cars. I grew up in a small rural town where cars meant freedom, mobility, and independence – a car simply made your world much bigger. I read car magazines cover to cover since well before I could drive, and I have loved car design and engineering for as long as I have loved architecture. I suspect I am not alone. I have known more than one architect with a strong affection for a BMW 2002. Perhaps this is only to be expected, since car design is not so different from architecture. It combines function, form, and meaning. Like great cars, great buildings are objects of expression and desire. So despite all the negative impact that cars have on our environment, I would like to suggest three ways in which the field of architecture and building construction would be improved if it were more like the field of car design and engineering.

First, modern automobiles are a remarkable synthesis of performance, reliability, safety, comfort, aesthetics, and even value. Think about how much better a new car is today than

it was in 1980. Can we say the same for buildings? Cars still come in the same fundamental forms and variations, but the process of continuous incremental improvement within those constraints has made nearly everything much better. By contrast, the fragmented building industry advances very slowly and architecture expends tremendous energy trying to toss out the old and invent the radical new.

Second, the media outlets focused on cars do a much better job of testing, reviewing, and genuinely critiquing cars than our media does with buildings. Car magazines do a remarkably thorough job of evaluating car performance, comfort, and aesthetics (even though they accept ads from car manufacturers). They don't hesitate to give negative criticism and they provide a wealth of data ranging from handling, to gas mileage, to cabin acoustics, to carbon output. Contrast this with the typical architecture or "shelter" magazine article in which cost data is largely or completely absent, building performance claims are not substantiated, durability is generally ignored, and negative aesthetic criticism is usually withheld.

Third, car design, like much industrial design, is elevating the quality of design at even the lowest consumer level. Successful industrial design is wildly popular while transforming, not simply following, consumer tastes. Think of the contrast between the design of the luxury sedan parked in the driveway versus the design of the typical "McMansion." The same consumer bought both. The days of the fixed vinyl top car with the appliqué hinge on the C pillar are behind us. Can we do the same with the screw-on vinyl shutter? 