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Salon de Refuse

-by Lynn Becker

A design competition for sidewalk receptacles comes up with some fresh, fun ideas for overcoming Chicago's apathy toward recycling.

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It's likely that there's never been as much garbage in Daley



Plaza as there was on Friday, August 19th, but that was OK, because it was almost all within one of the 25 prototypes that were finalists in a competition for the design of recycling receptacles, co-sponsored by the city and the [Chicago Chapter of the American Institute of Architect's](#) Young Architects Forum.

Recycling has been taking its lumps in Chicago lately. In March, a Chicago Tribune expose got the city to admit that the recycling rate had fallen to 18%, and that the combined amount of waste going through the city's four high-tech sorting centers had dropped over 30,000 tons from a peak of 126,000 tons in 2000. The Tribune also contended that more and more waste is being sent to landfills owned by politically-connected insiders. [Mayor Richard M. Daley](#) responded, as he is wont to do when bad news hits the fan, with disengaged consternation. "People don't recycle," he said. "I don't know why. We are doing our best"

Maybe the AIA competition could help give recycling a new look. The original 125 competitors were winnowed down by an earlier jury to 25 finalists, reviewed by a second jury that included Chicago architects [Carol Ross-Barney](#), [Jeanne Gang](#), and [Doug Garofalo](#).

"There was certainly debate," says Garofalo.



“All [the entries] needed varying degrees of development and given the diversity of jurors, [it was] not so easy to agree on a winner.”



Perhaps the most wildly imaginative entry came from [Mark Foster Gage](#).

Its form resembled the exposed backbone of some weird, prehistoric beast. It was the only entry to be displayed in a plastic case, raising an immediate red flag about its ability to withstand Chicago's mean streets. Also at the cutting edge was Lisa Wai's and Helen Nethercote's untitled entry, depicted as a shape like an aerated egg of some alien life form set down on the windswept plaza at Congress and Michigan.

Perhaps the most loveable of the entries, second-place winner Emily Siegler's and Steffi Xiao's Green Being is a stackable green globe that presents more than a passing (but unlitagable) resemblance to Monsters,



Inc.'s one-eyed Mike. “(It) presented a fun new image for recycling,” says competition juror, architect Jeanne Gang. Yet beyond the whimsy, there's a creative rethinking of what recycling can be. One of the globes is punctured with holes for rolled-up newspapers that can either

be recycled or simply snapped up by an additional reader. Much more elegant than just leaving your newspaper on a subway seat. The downside, notes Gang, is that it “only held a dozen or so newspapers. We all liked the free standing version in the images better than the full scale built version that attached to an existing waste bin. We felt that in the attached version the size would be too small and too high and difficult to reach for disabled people and kids.”

When you look at entries like these, you'd wonder if they'd just be too attractively funky, whether the less principled among us would just swoop them up and bring them home to be a conversation piece in the back yard.

The flip side of that equation is how many of the entries may have been, as Garofalo notes, “too large and bulky - they would literally block typical sidewalks,” although the city has never considered this a problem with the elephantine bus shelters designed by Robert Stern, perhaps because the advertising they carry also makes them a source of revenue. In fact, Reform, the entry from Francis Cooke and Jerrico Prater, is a strip of five plastic



receptacles each in a different color as bright as a child's building block, doubles as a bus shelter, with a tall translucent overhang for protection from the elements.



Christine Marriot's untitled entry attempts to strike a better balance with a set of four short, slim plastic posts, one for each type of recyclable, that keep the sidewalk clear by



being mere entry points. The actual waste tumbles into sacks kept below grade. All four posts would be mounted on a single steel base. "This entire base," says Garofalo, "would be lifted up for emptying." He was taken by the design, but notes that it would not only require the sidewalks to be rebuilt, but "it would involve a redesign/retrofit of the [garbage] trucks."

Deborah Kang's and Amanda Smith's EcoTrio, winner of the competitions \$1,500 first prize, is more conservative, a sleek tri-toned, ovoid shaped enclosure with a foot pedal that allows you to deposit waste without having to touch the lid to lift it. "It seemed elegant and sensible in terms of scale and materiality," says Garofalo.

Gang also liked EcoTrio "because its oval shape, in plan, would function



well in a busy street environment," although its identity "was presented more clearly in the images than in the mock-up. The three compartments were intended to be made of distinct materials. Recycled aluminum and recycled plastic compartments were representative of the material to be placed inside. Cor-ten steel was employed for the waste compartment. Evidently, the designers couldn't acquire the recycled plastic in time for the mock-up, so the mock-up looked like it was made entirely of metal. The jurors agreed that with the

plastic recycling compartment made of a brightly colored plastic material this entry would have an elegant and clear response to the 'identity' factor.

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Clearly, recycling is a cause that the mayor cares deeply about, At the awards ceremony, he had to be pulled away from his intent reading of the competition's program book when it was his turn to take the podium. There, his head wasn't buried in the usual printed speech, but he spoke at length, off-the-cuff, about the importance he places on recycling. Does he

have the will to divorce the city's program from the kind of insider politics that the Tribune article revealed? Will the city ever figure out a way to break through consumer indifference?

The city is addressing that last question with a number of different approaches. Earlier this year, it awarded \$50,000 grants to each of five community groups from Garfield Park to



**FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: THOMAS KERWIN, PRESIDENT, AIA CHICAGO
FIRST PRIZE WINNERS ECOTRIO'S DEBORAH KANG AND AMANDA
SMITH, MAYOR RICHARD M. DALEY**

Edgewater to come up with their own ideas for increasing the rate of recycling. A second approach is being tested in a pilot program in the 19th ward of Alderwoman Virginia Rugai, another of the competition's jury members. Residents deep-six the blue bags, and just keep recyclable waste in a small bin provided by the city, which then gets dumped into an outdoor 96 gallon rolling cart, also provided by the city, from which it's



collected and sent to an automated sorting center in Chicago Ridge. In an interview with [CBS2 Chicago](#), Rugai claims it's goosed the recycling rate up above 85%.

In the last analysis, it's all about making recycling as painless as possible, maybe even fun. Those vibrantly creative prototypes submitted to the AIA could help point the way, but the depressing end for all the competitions that the city gets involved with seems to be that none of the designs ever get made or built. Will we ever see any of the receptacle designs on a Chicago street? Why not let all that talent loose on those 96 gallon rolling carts? If what they come up with is anywhere near as good as what was on display at Daley Plaza, it could transform recycling from a dull duty to a neighborhood fashion statement.



LEFT, TRIOS RECYCLING POD, WINNER OF PEOPLE'S CHOICE AWARD; RIGHT, REINFORM THE CIRCLE

The three winning receptacles from the AIA competition, along with depictions of 83 other entries, are scheduled to be on display at the Cityspace Gallery of the Chicago Architecture Foundation, 224 S. Michigan Avenue, from October 14th through mid-November.

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