

Sound a gong for the usual suspects

Burghers, chips off the old blocks and a couple of grand Pianos. It must be the award season, writes **Elizabeth Farrelly**.

Clubs, gongs and more clubs. If you feel like you've seen it all before, in the awards department, well, it's true. You have. It's that time of year and what, honestly, would you expect?

Awards, such as those the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) hands out to itself each year, provide a useful framework of excellence, however subjective. In doing it, though, it realises too the human need for hierarchy, unfashionable as that is outside the dedicated-doping arena. And since professional institutes are hill tribes in designer dress, institute awards become pecking-order devices designed to keep the flock online, ordered and, well, pecking. No surprise, therefore, that this year's award list, while well chosen and on the whole well deserved, comprises almost entirely the usual suspects.

You might see this as ironic considering that the institute (NSW chapter) has, in the redoubtable Caroline Pidcock, its first female president. Not just female, either, but issues-driven, having carefully spread her President's Award across a number of firms to recognise their affirmative action credentials. Doubly ironic since not one of these supposedly femino-philiac firms – Hassell, Brian Meyerson Architects, RJMT, Woods Bagot – is associated with a high-profile woman designer. Family-friendly policies, sure, but grrr-stars? No sirree.

Same goes for the awards proper. Of the 30 given, four went to name-females, of which three were, in fact, to boy-girl duos, two for single suburban houses. The stand-out exception was the award to the president herself (not a jury member) for her collaboration with the architect-sculptor Richard Goodwin on the Shellharbour Workers' Club. All of which may signify that Pidcock is right: More Affirmative Action Required Here. Or it may, on the other hand, signify that however flexible working hours become, femaleness and architecture's star system just don't mix.

Not that equality is what awards are about. On the contrary awards (see above) are pecking-order devices. And on the whole, it must be said, they went to quality recipients.

The big turn-up was Renzo Piano, whose single Sydney project took out both big ones – the Sulman for Aurora Place and the Wilkinson for the many-louved Macquarie Apartments.

Aurora is, in a word, gorgeous; shamelessly feminine in a dark-suited corporate world, she is one of the few Sydney buildings you could actually wish taller. Slender, curvy and translucent, she is daughter to the Opera House, sailor-Piano's homage to sailor-Utzon. His building, said Piano, was mainsail to Utzon's wind-filled spinnaker.

This is not, in fact, architecture at all, since it's not about anything – except slipslapslapping one mindless fashion over another.

And just as the Opera House has always inspired lyrical analogy – sails, barnacles, turtles making love – Aurora, too, is plied with metaphor. Like a champagne flute, jungle flower or exquisite marine creature, she opens delicately to sun and sea breeze in a way that is stylish, poised and euphoric.

Macquarie Apartments is quite different in character, being low, linear and street-hugging, but no less svelte. No less desirable. Sheathed in a fully operable glass wall on its own glass structure, the building is grounded – to Sydney and to planet Earth – by the terracotta (actually ceramic) panels in which it is otherwise clad. Demonstrating, in the jury's words, an "urban sensibility and genuine environmental intelligence", Macquarie Apartments has finally made city-living an A-list option.

So the breather in these two awards will not be their design quality, which is beyond doubt, but

their provenance. Built of American low-iron glass and German ceramic, designed by an Italian in response to the Sydney building designed by a Dane. Is there anything Australian about Aurora? Well, yes, actually.

Not least that mixing-pot multiculturalism itself. Bathed in Sydney's clear light, easy warmth and hedonistic habits, Piano's intuitive impulse to filter the light and open his taut-skinned skyscraper to street, sea and air seems especially apt. And especially Sydney.

Beneath Piano's extraordinary umbrella accomplishment sit a number of lesser architecture awards. These went to Richard Johnson's very self-possessed Asian Galleries at AGNSW, Andrew Anderson's apple-cheeked Sydney Theatre on Hickson Road, Ed Lippmann's MLC school pool (good, but not as good as Boy Charlton), Harry Seidler's fabulously-foyered but compositionally flawed Cove

Apartments in The Rocks and Romaldo Giurgola's St Patrick's Cathedral, Parramatta.

This last is the greatest disappointment, since Giurgola's down-the-line-modern determination to demystify religion in the common light of day – pale-plastering even the gaunt and blackened interior of the sandstone original and centralising the altar, very Vatican II – produces more of a shadowless corporate meeting space than any spiritual haven.

But they're good solid burghers all. And not a female in sight. They are there, of course, the women, tucked in behind the throne. Propping it up, much of the time. But architecture, it seems, still prefers its women in purdah. Now that's mysterious.

The single houses basket, usually the awards' most bountiful, this year yielded no Wilkinson, but three confident winners all the same – Durbach and Block's characteristically spry House Spry at Point Piper, Dawson Brown's

beautifully controlled up-tempo version of Alec Tzannes's famed Mackeral Beach house and the extraordinary Bourne + Blue (with Stutchbury and Pape) eyecatcher on the hill at Newcastle.

The Brisbane firm Donovan Hill has been flavour of the month for some time. So long, in fact, it's a surprise to see it bothering with something as small as Tibet (Queen Street, Woollahra) which, as a terrace-house makeover, got the gong in the alterations and additions section. Not just any terrace-house makeover, though; this one is exquisite. The perfect disguise for a frock-shop masquerading as a gallery, and a rare example of that endangered beast – masterful architecture that forgets to take itself too seriously.

Taking yourself seriously is well nigh impossible, one imagines, in Dale Jones-Evans's quirky "Art Wall" office building in the Cross, where a sheet of glass and its rusted-steel snowflake-pattern chemise is all that separates every pee you take from the William Street rush-hour. With its backlit Emily Kngwarreye headdress and sinuous rusted-steel retail base, Art Wall collected the Colorbond Award – not bad for a building without any. Maybe it'll become a cautionary tale showing what happens when you don't. Colorbond, that is.

As ever, while some are exposing their all, others are covering on up. The winner of the Premier's Award – a block of flats at 21-23 Hereward Street, Maroubra – is the only awardee not pictured in the blurb. And a quick glance tells you why. Maroubra is Sydney's little Florida, last bastion of our fully fledged multivalent ugliness. And, like Parramatta Cathedral, it is being blanded-out by respectability. The Premier, a local fluffy-slipper, loves it.

This particular three-storey redbrick walk-up, in a street of same, has been improved within an inch of its life: rendered in dogtrud puree, hung with (sigh) louvres and reborn as "Aqua". While its least lovely features remain (the eight-foot ceilings, the aluminium sliders, the unusable balconies and the single sunless aspect), the building's only vivid moment, that Maroubra-red shadowbrick, has been energetically aspirational-over.



Feminine beauty ... Renzo Piano's Aurora Place.

The Premier, eager to apply such treatment "across middle Sydney to countless other eyesores", concedes that "it's not high architecture". Can't argue with that. But what Bob Carr hasn't noticed is that this is not, in fact, architecture at all, since it's not about anything – except slipslapslapping one mindless fashion over another.

A redbrick walk-up converted

to eco-soundness – solar-powered, grey-watered, self-composting – now that'd be something. Something to emulate, applaud, award. But this sad cover-up? What is this urge to enforce uniformity? To prefer dull mediocrity over the vividly hideous? The Premier, and the RAIA, should be ashamed.

Dissent, dissent, while you still can.