INNOVATION

HOPE

hope has the power to unlock a new future for design.

HOPE IN THE PLATFORM: SOCIAL INGENUITY AND THE EVOLUTION OF DESIGN RECOGNITION

The author in discussion with Daniel Martinage, CAE, former Executive Director of IDSA, exploring the future possibilities for global design award platforms. (Credit: Joe Stitzlein)

Why do design award platforms matter to designers, design firms, and society? How can we enhance their value to better support and empower designers in creating broader positive social impact? Many current award systems have become overly commercial and outcome-driven. In practice, recognition often correlates with the financial investment made by companies or individuals, raising concerns about equity and merit. While economic sustainability is essential, it's worth asking: Are the awarded projects truly addressing critical and meaningful questions?

In the pursuit of efficiency and streamlined evaluation, we may risk overlooking the intentions behind design processes and the complexity of the challenges being addressed. To better support designers, we should consider how to strike a balance between transactional business goals and the deeper, more conversational aspects of creative inquiry. As international competitions such as IDSA's own International Design Excellence Awards (IDEA), iF, Red Dot, and the Good Design Award continue to proliferate, the role of international design award platforms is evolving. Can we envision a Design Award Platform 2.0— one that transcends recognition to foster meaningful and lasting change?

In this article, I'd like to reframe the design-award platform as a catalyst for reflection and transformation.

Drawing on my experience as a jury member for global competitions—including IDEA, the Spark Award, International Design Awards (IDA), and Good Design Austria—I explore how design award platforms can be reimagined to better serve both the design profession and society at large. Through the lens of social context, I examine three emerging opportunities to leverage the embedded hope in design: design across scales, design with communities, and design for impact.

Social Ingenuity in Design Platforms
Human ingenuity has long driven technological advancements, shaping human behavior, industry landscapes, and social infrastructures (Scott & Gratton, 2021). Design is no exception. As we move toward

The author facilitated a co-creation workshop with designers from Convatec, a global medical products and technologies company to explore and investigate concepts related to longevity planning services. (Credit: Sheng-Hung Lee)

a humanity-centered design approach—championed by international well-known design scholar and author Don Norman in his latest book, *Design for a Better World: Meaningful, Sustainable, Humanity-Centered* (2024), through his concept of life-centered design—designers need to broaden their perspectives beyond human users to consider social, environmental, and systemic impacts.

Designers and design organizations should adapt by integrating environmental, governmental, and societal factors into their work and research. This shift challenges the traditional "win a design award, gain global recognition" model, urging design award platforms to redefine their evaluation criteria (Lee et al., 2023). While winning an award remains valuable for designers, design firms, and companies, they are increasingly focused on the long-term impact of their work and how design competitions can serve as a platform for driving meaningful change.

Below, I outline three key embedded hopes—design across scale, design by community, and design for impact—that might help designers, educators, and award jurors reassess how international design award platforms are structured and perceived in the evolving landscape of design excellence.

Embedded Hope 1: Design Across Scale
As society grows more complex and interconnected—driven by computational design, artificial intelligence (AI), and emerging technologies—the scope of design has expanded beyond products and services to encompass experiences, systems, and broader social innovation. This transformation raises a critical question: How can design award platforms adapt to assess projects that operate across multiple scales, from tangible objects to intangible services and systemic solutions?

Traditional design disciplines are becoming increasingly fluid, with new media (e.g., information design, computational visual graphics), immersive technologies (e.g., AR, VR, and XR), and interdisciplinary approaches (e.g., social science, psychology, material science, and systems engineering) reshaping the definition of design.

To stay relevant, design award platforms need to develop new, effective evaluation frameworks that reflect this expanded and increasingly complex landscape. For example, evaluating design for social innovation projects using traditional product design criteria—which focus primarily on aesthetics, functionality, user desirability, and business viability—can be inherently limiting and ineffective.

The hope embedded in design award platforms lies in their ability to evolve—specifically, to assess design projects operating across multiple scales, from tangible products to intangible services and systemic interventions. Such adaptability can better empower and inspire designers and educators to think beyond disciplinary silos and design across scales.

Embedded Hope 2: Design by Community
The rise of co-creation and participatory design has reshaped how design challenges are approached and addressed, particularly in social and economic contexts. As renowned design scholar Ezio Manzini emphasized in *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation* (2015), the role of design in social innovation is shifting from being "for the community" to "by the community."

In this evolving landscape, designers are no longer merely creative service providers or problem solvers. Instead, they are increasingly positioning themselves as design coaches and creative facilitators, empowering participants and clients to actively co-shape both content and process.

To stay relevant, design award platforms need to adapt their judging criteria to recognize not only final design outcomes (e.g., rendering results or physical prototypes) but also the collaborative processes behind them (e.g., cross-disciplinary approaches that reframe complex challenges with creative perspectives). The dynamic nature of co-creation—where designers, key stakeholders, and communities work together to shape solutions—demands a more fluid, process-oriented evaluation model that values both the journey and the outcome.

For example, in 2018, the GOOD DESIGN Grand Award went to the Otera Oyatsu Club for its "temple activities for solving poverty problems." This initiative tackled the growing issue of child poverty in Japan. Led by a monk and supported by volunteers and local residents, the project offered food, emotional support, and well-being services to families in need. The award recognized how the Otera Oyatsu Club used design not just to create things, but to shape meaningful social impact, expanding the role of design into community care and everyday life (Senda, 2018). It's a powerful example of how design can help build a more inclusive society with care and respect.

The example of "temple activities for solving poverty problems" suggests that the award structure should be broadened to better recognize projects with a profound social impact and community empowerment. It also prompts judges to reflect on whether the submissions are not only asking the right questions, but also raising meaningful ones that address the heart of societal challenges.

MIT graduate students Benjamin Zeng and Joy Liu developed The Conversation Canopy, a toolkit designed to facilitate intergenerational interactions and foster positive social impact through product and service innovation. (Credit: Sheng-Hung Lee)

Amid growing complexity and systemic design challenges, the hope embedded in future design award platforms lies in their transparency, accessibility, and flexibility of design process. By embracing these qualities, award platforms can foster broader participation from individuals with diverse backgrounds and expertise, actively supporting contributions across all phases of the design process—from inspiration and research to ideation, implementation, and refinement.

Embedded Hope 3: Design for Impact

A growing challenge for design award platforms is how to effectively measure the real-world impact of winning projects. Design education is already shifting from discipline-specific expertise to interdisciplinary problem-solving, as demonstrated by programs such as the University of Pennsylvania's Master of Integrated Product Design (IPD) and Harvard University's Master in Design Engineering (MDE). This shift raises a critical question: How can design award platforms evolve to assess not only product aesthetics and functionality but also the long-term social, environmental, and economic impacts of design?

To remain relevant, design award platforms must explore new impact-driven metrics that go beyond traditional categories such as product, service, and experience. This includes integrating long-term social impact assessments, collaborative decision-making models, and systemic evaluation frameworks that better capture the complexity and enduring influence of contemporary design solutions.

The hope embedded in these platforms lies in reframing evaluation criteria from project-based, solution-oriented outputs to purpose-driven, impact-oriented approaches. The next generation of design award platforms should consider not only product features and business strategies, but also the long-term implications of design through the layer of individuals, communities, and society at large.

Hope in Industrial Design: Celebrate Meaningful Design Excellence

The landscape of international design award platforms is undergoing a profound transformation, shaped by shifts in human behavior, emerging service models, generative AI, cultural dynamics, sustainable business practices, political forces, and evolving societal needs. Today, designers or design companies' motivation to participate in design competitions extends beyond the pursuit of recognition—it is increasingly about driving meaningful and lasting impact. By embracing three key embedded hopes—design across scale, design by community, and design for impact—design platforms, educators, and practitioners can rethink their strategies and redefine what it means to celebrate meaningful design excellence in the 21st century.

In this context, hope is not an abstract ideal but a design-driven commitment to shaping more equitable and sustainable futures. It calls on designers, educators, researchers, and industry leaders to act as catalysts for transformation, championing inclusivity, diversity, resilience, and humility. By embedding hope into the structure of design award platforms, educational ecosystems, and business strategies, we can reimagine them not only as tools for recognizing excellence, but also as instruments for cultivating optimism, agency, and purpose in creating life-centered design solutions and making positive social impact.

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