Australia's best house

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By Richard Jinman

Sydney may be obsessed by bricks and mortar but it is behind Melbourne and Brisbane in terms of challenging, innovative architecture.

That appears to be the message from this year's National Architecture Awards, where the top honours went to a "testosterone-charged" building at a Brisbane girls school and a strikingly avant-garde house on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula.

Buildings in NSW won just seven of the 31 awards and commendations handed out by the Australian Institute of Architects at a ceremony in Adelaide last night. CarriageWorks - an arts venue housed in converted railway workshops at Eveleigh, the EDO apartment building in Woolloomooloo and The Wharf, the headquarters of the Sydney Theatre Company, were among the state's winners.

Brisbane won the nation's top architecture prize for the second year running, the Sir Zelman Cowen Award for Public Architecture, which went to the Cherrell Hirst Creative Learning Centre at Brisbane Girls Grammar School. The top honour for residential architecture, the Robin Boyd Award, went to the Klein Bottle House, a bold structure on the Mornington Peninsula.

Houses on the peninsula, an hour's drive from Melbourne, have won the Robin Boyd Award for the past three years.

Alec Tzannes, the chairman of the judging panel, said the quality and diversity of the winners suggested that Australian architecture was thriving. He questioned the notion that Sydney was falling behind the other states.

"It's not a bad year for NSW," he said. "It just so happens you have these incredible shots out of the blue from Melbourne and Brisbane."

Mr Tzannes said the skill and imagination of Sydney's architects was equal to the best designers anywhere in the world, but he conceded the city might have "a cultural issue in terms of the commissioning of the buildings".

The EDO apartment building, designed by the Sydney firm Stanisic Associates, and CarriageWorks, by Tonkin Zulaikha Greer, were "really innovative".

CarriageWorks, which won the Lachlan Macquarie Award for Heritage, was so good it almost won a commercial architecture award as well, Mr Tzannes said.

Several other NSW buildings also won awards yesterday. Leura House, designed by James Stockwell, won a residential award and Rouse Hill Town Centre won the the Walter Burley Griffin Award for Urban Design.

The Joern Utzon Award for International Architecture went to the National Aquatic Centre in Beijing, known as the Water Cube, designed by a team led by the Sydney firm PTW.