Fuss over winning designs


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By Jason Dowling

NEW multimillion-dollar learning centres at two elite private schools have controversially won the country's two highest "public architecture" awards.

John Wardle Architects' $21 million Nigel Peck Centre for Learning and Leadership at Melbourne Grammar School won the National Award for Public Architecture, while the Cherrell Hirst Creative Learning Centre at Brisbane Girls Grammar School won the top award, the Sir Zelman Cowen Award for Public Architecture.

Alex Tzannes, chairman of the jury that decided the national architecture awards announced last night, said the definition of "public architecture" was a difficult one.

Professor Tzannes said it was decided to include all buildings deemed to be "public" under the Building Code of Australia for the public architecture awards. "Ultimately the education of our children is a public matter," he said.

Melbourne Grammar's year 12 fees are about $20,000 annually and the school made an operating profit/surplus of $10.6 million for the 2006 calendar year.

Simon Knott, a Melbourne architect and juror on the national awards, said the public architecture awards "probably had the wrong name".

Smaller-budget projects also impressed. Phooey Architects won the national award for small-project architecture with its children's activity centre in the Dorcas Street, South Melbourne, housing commission flats. The activity centre was built using four shipping containers bolted together, with a $150,000 budget, for the City of Port Phillip.

Judges described the new centre as a "wonderful building that is inventive, flexible, contextually strong and environmentally considerate".

Mr Knott, who has a weekly architecture show on Triple R radio, said the activity centre was "a fantastic addition to the playground for underprivileged kids from social housing — really fantastic piece of design", he said.

Australia's top residential architecture award, the Robin Boyd Award for Residential Architecture, went to the Klein Bottle House by Melbourne couple Rob McBride and Debbie Lynn Ryan of McBride Charles Ryan.

It was the third consecutive year the top residential architecture award went to a house on the Mornington Peninsula.

Victorian projects won three major awards, seven other national awards and three commendations.