

## **Doctored photo raises questions about ethics in architecture contests**

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# **Doctored photo raises questions about ethics in architecture contests**

The ethics of design photography: Is doctoring architecture photos OK?

Architectural photography is supposed to be different from the airbrushed images of nude women that are about to disappear from the centerfold of Playboy magazine. But what if an edited photograph of a building doesn't just crop out visual clutter like street lights but alters the contours of the building itself? What should we think about an architectural award that was bestowed on the basis of such a doctored image?

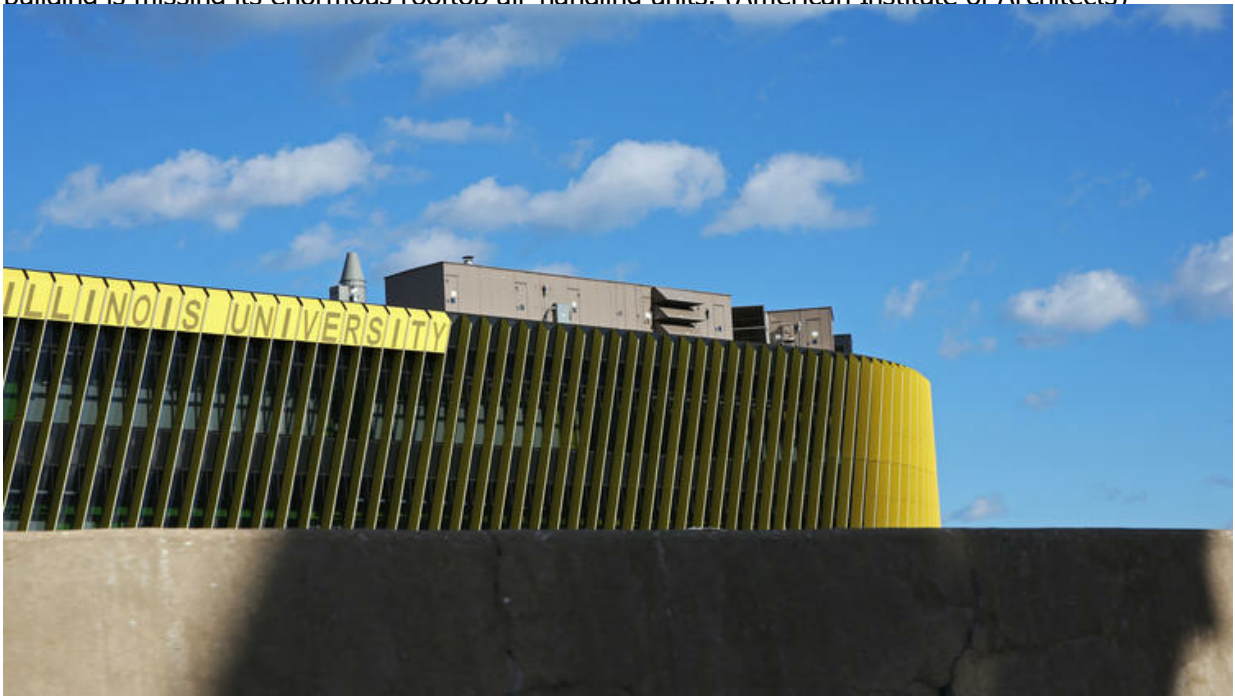
These questions came to mind recently after the Chicago chapter of the American Institute of Architects announced the winners of its annual Design Excellence Awards. Five buildings won honor awards, the top level of recognition. One of them was El Centro, a striking, boomerang-shaped structure with blue and gold fins along the east side of the Kennedy Expressway. The building, designed by Chicago architect Juan Moreno, is a satellite of Northeastern Illinois University, whose main campus is 3 miles to the north.

When I reviewed El Centro last year, I praised its dramatic exterior and user-friendly interior. But readers emailed to say that I'd overlooked a key flaw: A row of enormous air-handling units that lumber across the rooftop like a freight train. They were right. El Centro is supposed to delight the eye of passing drivers. But the view from the Kennedy's southbound lanes reveals those ugly rooftop units and the architect's inability to reconcile form and function. I quickly added that criticism to my online review.



Doctored photograph

El Centro, a building along the Kennedy Expressway that is a satellite of Northeastern Illinois University, is seen in this doctored photo, which was submitted to an architectural award jury. The building is missing its enormous rooftop air-handling units. (American Institute of Architects)



These images of the El Centro building as it appears from the vantage point of the southbound Kennedy Expressway shows the air-handling units digitally removed from the above photo.

So the honor award puzzled me. How could a jury of respected architects from out of town have missed this glaring misstep? Easily, it turned out.

Unlike the AIA's national awards, which require that at least one juror visit a short-listed building, or the Pritzker Architecture Prize, whose jury travels extensively, jurors for the Chicago AIA honors typically don't inspect buildings firsthand. There simply isn't the time or money. The jury meets for just one day. In the distinguished building category, there are scores of entries (134 this year), and they consist of projects from all over the world. So according to people who administer the contest, the jurors consider required materials (design statements and photographs) as well as floor and site plans, which are optional.

The secondhand nature of the process — jurors are essentially seeing the nominated buildings as their architects want them to be seen, not from the perspective of users or passersby — puts a premium on photographs that portray the architecture as accurately as possible.

Moreno, a talented architect who Mayor Rahm Emanuel appointed to the city's landmarks commission, submitted eight photographs of El Centro to the AIA. Four showcased the exterior. None showed the air-handling units. One of the four exterior photos was shot from across the highway, a vantage point that should have shown the units. But the photographer, Chicago's Tom Rossiter, admitted to me last week that he digitally edited the units out. That turned El Centro's jumbled top into a razor-sharp edge.

When I asked Rossiter if he'd made that decision on his own, he referred me to Moreno, who acknowledged in an earlier interview that the units were far larger than he'd anticipated and that options for screening them had proved prohibitively expensive.

"The truth of the matter is, I never tell an artist what to do. That's their work," Moreno said, referring to the photographer.

Was it right, I asked, to submit a photo that altered the reality of his building?

"I never saw it as a misrepresentation," Moreno responded. "The truth of the matter is, in every photograph that takes place on any building, there is an artistic representation that occurs."

That's hard to dispute. Architectural photographers have long flattered or dramatized their subjects by picking just the right vantage point, lighting, or weather conditions. The architects pay them, after all.



El Centro from far away

The El Centro building from a less flattering angle during less than flattering weather conditions, Dec. 2, 2015. (Erin Hooley / Chicago Tribune)

One of the most famous examples, Chicago photographer Bill Hedrich's 1937 shot of Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater house in western Pennsylvania, employs a close-in angle and other techniques to accentuate how the house and its cantilevered balconies heroically soar over a tumbling stream.

"He decided to use a slightly wide-angle lens for that shot. He moved in under the building and used this lens to make that perspective very strong," said Jon Miller, president of Chicago's Hedrich Blessing Photographers. "It's an honest representation but it's dramatic ... you're interpreting the architecture, not just recording it."

Yet the danger of such images, as the critic Alexandra Lange has written, is that "their drama may replace the real thing." And the digital age has multiplied the danger — or, at least, the ease with which photographers can alter reality using Adobe Photoshop and other editing tools.

The submission for another of this year's Chicago AIA honor award winners — the Theatre School of [DePaul University](#), by the Chicago office of CannonDesign and Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects of New Haven, Conn. — includes a photograph of the building that crops out a streetlight, telephone lines and other disruptions.

Before the advent of digital editing, said the photographer, Jeff Goldberg of the New York-based Esto Photographic, he would have searched for angles that would avoid such clutter. "Now," he added, "I have the ability to remove it."

But there's a difference, as Goldberg and the three jurors who judged the architecture category of Chicago AIA awards all said, between editing out clutter around a building and editing the building itself.

"That is a pretty brutal omission. ... For an awards submission, it's inappropriate," said Mathew Chaney, a partner at Ehrlich Architects in Culver City, Calif. "There's a little line somewhere and this little maneuver crossed that line."

He and fellow juror Jill Lerner, a principal at New York-based Kohn Pedersen Fox, said they would not have given the honor award to El Centro if they had seen a photograph with the air-handling units. "Oh my goodness, that's not truth in advertising," Lerner said of the edited image.

The third juror, Dan Wilson, a principal at Olson Kundig architects in Seattle, declined to say whether the award should be taken away. But he acknowledged that a realistic photograph of El Centro's exterior "would have altered the lens through which we viewed the project."

One does not need to be a professional ethicist to recommend that the AIA and other design organizations sharpen their awards program standards to reflect the dangers of the digital age: Photographs that doctor the reality of a building or omit key perspectives of it will be considered outside the pale of ethical standards and will cause a project to be eliminated from consideration.

Yet the digital age also offers opportunities for ensuring the veracity of photographs.

If an architectural jury can't visit a building, its members should at least use a program like Google Earth to check it out. Virtual reality tours may someday present another "sniff test" opportunity. But in the end, there's no substitute for seeing architecture firsthand.

"If you are giving an award and you want it to be a prestigious recognized award, it does come with a responsibility, with due diligence of visiting buildings and doing research about them," said Martha Thorne, the Pritzker Prize's executive director. Digitally enhanced photography, she said, isn't always "a reflection of reality. It's using technology to interpret reality or enhance it."

In the wake of the El Centro issue, the Chicago AIA chapter seems to understand the need to update its standards to the digital age.

"To date," the chapter's executive vice president, Zurich Esposito, wrote in an email, "we have relied on applicants to provide images that accurately portray the projects being considered in their submissions. We are in the process of developing additional instructions related to photography."

They should, and soon, or else the AIA awards will have all the credibility of those Playboy centerfolds.

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