

Best projects chosen in 2009 Lab of the Year competition

Feb. 27, 2009

By Paul B. Livingstone



The Northwest Science Building at Harvard Univ.'s Cambridge campus blends architectural sensibilities with crucial laboratory functionality. Credit: Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP

The results are in and we have a winner! But that hasn't always been the case. What is interesting about the Lab of the Year competition, which has been held for the past 43 years, is that the demanding criteria does not guarantee that the field of entries will produce a winner. Projects that win the top awards (Lab of the Year, Renovated Lab of the Year) are architecturally distinguished facilities whose overall design quality is recognized by the judges. They do not need to be massive or costly, but they must represent high quality design and fulfillment of their primary mission.

There are more than 30 different characteristics that the judges evaluate these labs for including Siting, Planning, Flow of materials and people, Plant Operation, Aesthetics, Working Conditions, Energy Efficiency, and Cost to Build/Operate. Meeting all of these characteristics simultaneously is not an easy job for the architects and engineers. As a result, judges have decided not to award the Lab of the Year award three times (1979, 1983, and 2008) because no entry for that year met all of those demanding criteria.

But this year, the penultimate Lab of the Year award was justly given to the 70,000 square-foot **Gary C. Comer Geochemistry Building on the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory Campus of Columbia Univ. in Palisades, N.Y.**

Officially completed in late 2007, the building houses extensive lab space directly supporting R&D that advances our understanding of climate change. Positioned dramatically overlooking the Hudson River, it supports numerous specialized mass spectroscopy, geochemistry, and instrument-based labs.

Designed by Payette of Boston, the building is cleverly camouflaged to minimize its visual impact on such an exposed setting, while providing an abundance of natural light and invigorating river valley views while deftly addresses the practical needs of a high technology laboratory.

In addition the overall winner, High Honors went to one deserving laboratory. Designed for flexibility, the **Northwest Science Building, Harvard Univ., Cambridge, Mass.** features an open floor plan that stresses the cross-disciplinary nature of the occupants. Instead of being dedicated to specific departments, the office and lab space is demarcated according to groups of faculty which share similar research interests. Designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP, the building will combine scientists in neuroscience, systems biology, and genomics.

Two laboratories earned Special Mention awards this year: the **Steacie SuperLab Laboratory Building, Carleton Univ., Ottawa, Ont.** and the **Catalyst & Material Reliance Technology Center, City of Surat, Gujarat, India.** These laboratories reflect the global reach of not only our Lab of the Year competition, but of R&D lab construction (and renovation) at the highest level. The Steacie SuperLab was a renovation project that converted a dreary looking chemistry lab at Carleton Univ. into a large exciting, colorful teaching lab that brings new life and increased enrollment possibilities to the university.



The Catalyst & Material Research Technology Centre was a renovation project executed by an in-house team for an exceedingly low amount of money that resulted in a lab that meets all of the characteristics that define the current trends in new lab design like lab flexibility, interaction spaces, and creation of an environment for innovation. How are they judged?

The LOY judges are a mix of experienced people from the fields of R&D programming, planning, design, construction, and engineering. The panel also includes representatives from the “user” side—people who work in labs every day—and several knowledgeable people from the furniture/equipment vendor community. Editors of R&D Magazine and Laboratory Design Newsletter also serve on the panel. In all, the panel typically includes about a dozen “outside” judges and two to four staff editors.

Projects are eligible to win in a number of categories: Laboratory of the Year (the top award for new buildings), Renovated or Adaptive Reuse Laboratory of the Year (the top award for renovations/additions or adaptive reuse projects), High Honors (projects of excellent quality that just miss LOY status), and Special Mention (projects deserving recognition for some specific quality or feature). Judges may elect to withhold any of these awards, including LOY and Renovated LOY. They can also choose to give multiple awards in the High Honors or Special Mention categories.

As mentioned above, winning laboratories must rise to the top in 30 different judged characteristics.

2009 Winners, Lab of the Year

Gary C. Comer Geochemistry Building, Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory Campus, Columbia Univ., Palisades, N.Y.

2009 High Honors

Northwest Science Building, Harvard Univ., Cambridge, Mass.

2009 Special Mention

Stecie SuperLab Laboratory Building, Carleton Univ., Ottawa, Ont.

2009 Special Mention

Catalyst & Material Reliance Technology Center, City of Surat, Gujarat, India