

# Best of Canada

By David Lasker

*The 19th annual design awards attracted a record number of entries, and a subsequent record number of winners.*



Johnson Chou

Sue Bennett

Jeremy Vandermeij

(absent: Scot Laughton)

- *Canadian Interiors'* Best of Canada Design Awards is the country's only design competition to focus on interior design projects and products without regard to size, budget or location. We welcome submissions from interior designers, architects, interior architects, decorators and crafts persons.

Employing the adage "When it rains, it pours," last year was a rain shower of entries (175, at that point a record), but this year was a down-pour. Categories for project submissions include: exhibit; hospitality; institutional; marketing; office; residential; and retail. This year, we introduced an online submission portal that eliminated the need for entrants to mail in hard copies, as has been the process for the last 18 years; and when building anything online, there were bugs that needed to be worked out. This caused a tighter than normal window for submissions. Despite this, 316 entries were received - an all-time record.

We were able to enlist the aid of four design industry heavyweights to wade through the submissions to find the gold in this crucible. They are: **Sue Bennett**, CEO and principal of the eponymous Uxbridge, Ont.-based design firm Bennett Design; another principal and owner of an eponymous design firm, this one in Toronto, **Johnson Chou**; **Scot Laughton**, professor and Studio Head of the Industrial Design, School of Animation, Arts and Design department at Sheridan College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning; and **Jeremy Vandermeij**, Executive Director of the Toronto Design Offsite Festival.

Because of the sheer number of entries, judging could not be contained to a one-day affair. Continuing the tradition of judging the projects and products anonymously and on their own merits, this year the process was broken into two phases: a first cull done off-site, and then a week later the judges convened at a location to debate, discuss and defend the remaining entrants. Ultimately, a total of 31 winners were chosen, which include three products and 28 projects representing a cross-Canada spectrum as well as international locales such as the United States and The Netherlands.

When it came time to select Project of the Year, the judges were unanimous that the honour be bestowed on two: the soft and glowing Aesop store on Queen Street West in Toronto, by superkül ("This is so refreshing! You can't say it's this or that style" / "It's not like it's part of any aesthetic that's being overused" were among the judges' adulations); and He, She & It, a delicate project consisting of three artist studios, by Davidson Rafailidis ("The beauty! The simplicity! It's very poetic," enthused one judge, a sentiment shared by all).

• Congratulations to all 31 winners!

# Aesop Toronto superkül Toronto

Matte black and titanium finishes started appearing on luxury and performance cars a couple of years ago. Now something like that trendy automotive look makes a bold retail statement at the first Canadian store for Aesop, the Australian skin-care product line. Company philosophy dictates site-specific store design, reflecting the urban context. With its muted industrial aesthetic, the 990-sq.-ft. flagship salutes the historic mix of residential and manufacturing in its Queen Street West neighbourhood.

Display and sampling counters are arranged in a linear fashion along the quintessentially Torontonionian deep and narrow space, forming islands around which customers can test the various creams, lotions, cleansers and serums.

The interior was gutted to the existing maple flooring and original brick. This forms the substrate for an unusual art installation-like display system. Toronto artist Kathryn Walter was commissioned to wrap the east wall and part of the ceiling in layers of industrial felt and steel. Long shallow floating display shelves embed in the folds of the pleated wall with no visible means of support. Lacking the techy, mechanical busyness of typical shelving, Aesop's appears clean and seamless, the guts concealed from view.

The display wall observes Rule Number One of high-end retail: don't junk up the shelves by cramming in too much product. There is, as graphic designers say, plenty of white space around the goods. Calculating the proportion of blank felt wall to the total Aesop-item surface area would reveal parsimonious placement, the better to ensure a calm, serene, upmarket environment.

The wax coating on the blackened-steel shelves gleams with a soft, glowing lustre. The metal's dark patina contrasts appealingly against the wood, brick and felt. The material recurs in the store's many display tables, counters, sinks and even overhead in the ceiling lighting troughs.

Could all these non-glossy, non-greasy surfaces be a hidden persuader, to cite Vance Packard's 1957 bestseller on motivational consumer techniques? Skin shine being the bane of portrait photogs and selfie shooters, the expanses of matte finish in the store subliminally convey the message that Aesop products keep your skin similarly non-reflective.



Ben Rain/A-Frame Inc.

# Project of the Year



*Vandermeij: It's breathtaking. The details in this shop are impeccable. The wall shelves are thin steel that disappear into the drywall with no visible support and the felt installation is dynamic and excellently crafted.*