
The Winner's Circle

Past EEA winners describe
the excitement and impact
of recognition

By Samuel Greengard

Every year, ACEC Member Firms design thousands of projects around the globe. Many of these projects push the boundaries of innovation, creativity and overall excellence and redefine best practices—all in the hope of enhancing quality of life.

ACEC's national Engineering Excellence Awards (EEA) competition annually celebrates these achievements. An astute judging panel of built-environment practitioners painstakingly examines entries, which already have achieved top state-level honors, to select the best of the best.

Those who attend the annual EEA Gala Dinner and Awards Show—known as the “Academy Awards” of the engineering industry—say they walk away with a sense of overall industry pride and a personal accomplishment that comes with professional recognition at the highest level. Not surprisingly, a tremendous amount of excitement and anticipation surrounds the annual black-tie event, which takes place in Washington, D.C.

“It’s a great opportunity to meet up with peers, share success stories and see what is happening in the industry,” says Dale Miller, regional vice president for Tetra Tech. “It’s incredible to learn what award winners are doing, and it’s incredible to win an award—particularly because nominees have all won at the state level.”

The value of being nominated or



Officials from HDR are thrilled to receive a 2010 Grand Award for the Gills Onions Advance Energy Recovery System. Moments later, the project would also be named winner of the Grand Conceptor Award for the year's most outstanding engineering achievement.

winning can benefit a business by attracting new clients, cementing existing relationships, and helping the firm recruit and retain engineering talent. "Having this kind of recognition really meant a lot to everybody, and it was a definite boost in staff morale," says Brett Emmons, CEO of Emmons and Olivier Resources, Inc., whose firm won a Grand Award last year. "It strengthened our sense of working together and the purpose of what we're doing."

Building Bridges to Success

The Engineering Excellence Awards have spotlighted outstanding achievements in the engineering field since 1967. They highlight an array of projects large and small that deliver unsurpassed innovation, uniqueness, social value, economic

gains and sustainable benefits. Those who attend the ceremony say it is more than a chance to get out of the office and network with colleagues. It's an opportunity to see how top-tier firms are advancing design, engineering and construction.

Jon D. Magnusson, senior principal at Magnusson Klemencic Associates and a 26-time award winner, includes EEA awards among his proudest professional honors. His firm snagged its first Grand Conceptor Award in 1996 for updating and modernizing the KeyArena in Seattle. Magnusson Klemencic Associates again captured the year's top award in 2006 for remodeling a federal courthouse in Seattle and again in 2008 for transforming a neglected brown-field site in Seattle into the Olympic Sculpture Park, reconnecting the site to Elliott Bay while creating a new beach.

Magnusson says the scope and stature of the EEA awards make them special. "It incorporates a broad array of factors that extend beyond the technical aspects of a project. You see a diverse array of designs, materials and methods among the nominees and winners," he says. Moreover, the awards take into consideration a variety of engineering disciplines. "They incorporate many different types of engineering, which can make it appear that it's a bit of an apples and oranges comparison. But once the judges sort things out and declare a winner, it makes the award even more meaningful because you're not only competing against people doing the same type of work; you're competing with firms doing all sorts of things. They are the true leaders in the industry."

Tetra Tech's Miller says that he and



Dale Miller, of Tetra Tech, addresses the EEA Gala audience after his firm wins the 2012 Grand Conceptor Award for the Lake Borgne Surge Barrier in New Orleans, La.

members of his firm attend the EEA awards regularly. “It’s a great opportunity to meet and share your stories and your successes with your peers,” he says. When he found out that the firm was among the finalists for the 2012 Grand Conceptor Award, “My adrenaline and pulse shot up.” The firm took home that year’s top award for its design and construction of the Lake Borgne Surge Barrier in New Orleans, an innovative two-mile system on the east side of the city that blocks storm surges during hurricanes and other flooding events. It was the largest civil design project in the history of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

“When they announced that we had won the Grand Conceptor Award, the nervousness and excitement turned to euphoria,” Millers says. “As a firm, we had put a huge amount of effort into the project. It was a crowning moment for all the blood, sweat and tears.” Miller attended the ceremony with about 20 other colleagues, including top officials from the Corps. “When the slide appeared on the screen that displayed our project, the tables erupted in excitement. It was almost surreal.”

Others echo the sentiment. “When we won a 2015 Grand Award it was a very exciting moment. It was validation that we had some great work and helped advance the industry,” says Emmons, whose firm designed and built a zero-



Jon Magnusson addresses the EEA Gala audience after his firm, Magnusson Klemencic Associates, wins the 2006 Grand Conceptor Award for the Olympic Sculpture Park in Seattle.

discharge storm water system for Inver Grove Heights, Minn. “We were shocked and ecstatic, especially considering the level of competition and the fact that we are a small firm with only 35 employees.”

Local Recognition

The excitement of winning can take many forms. Emmons says that soon

after winning, he grabbed his mobile phone to inform colleagues who couldn’t attend the ceremony. As word got out, the congratulatory emails, text messages and calls streamed in, including some from the local city council. “There was an enormous sense of pride and accomplishment,” he says.

Finley Engineering Group, Inc., has captured three Honor Awards for projects in Vermont and Texas, and Managing Principal Craig Finley celebrates by trumpeting the award through an office celebration, social media and personal recognition. The firm has 23 employees, and 15 are engineers. “Everybody works hard and long hours,” he says. “But their families don’t always see what they are working on and what they are doing. So, we try to use these events and awards to deliver some recognition on a personal level with staff, families and friends.”

Finley says EEA nominations and awards can significantly affect how firms are viewed. The company has captured more than 50 Engineering Excellence Awards and has been recognized as one of the “Best Firms to Work For.” Finley believes the two are connected. “The staff knows we are entering projects into competitions,” he says. “There is an enormous sense of pride, and it grows when we win an award. We believe that it helps with recruitment, retention and morale.”

Finley informs clients about nominations and awards—and invites those whose projects are nominated to attend the gala. “It’s a great event. It’s enjoyable to wear black tie, and it’s great to see all the people and nominated projects,” he says. “But it also helps reinforce existing relationships. And when the dust settles and you win an award, it leads to people looking forward to the next job or opportunity to work together.”

Magnusson agrees that the awards represent more than a momentary honor. “When we recruit new engineers and they walk past pieces of art that display major projects and the awards, they are genuinely impressed. It makes a difference.” ■

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