

Ralph Rapson Traveling Study Award (RRTSA) Task Force Recommendations to the MAF Board of Directors

Final Draft January 19, 2023

TASK FORCE MEMBERS:

- **Shida Du, AIA** – 2022 MAF President, past RRTSA recipient (2018), RRTSA Committee member, task force chair
- **Meredith Hayes Gordon, AIA** – 2022 MAF Immediate Past President, task force vice chair
- **Bake Baker, FAIA** – 2023 MAF President
- **Katie Blaisdell, AIA** – AIA Minnesota Women in Architecture Committee co-chair, past RRTSA finalist
- **Wale Falade, AIA, NOMA** – 2023 MSP NOMA President, MSP NOMA representative, past RRTSA participant
- **Rebecca Muchow, AIA** – AIA Minnesota Committee on Design 2022 co-chair
- **Toby Rapson, AIA** – Son of Ralph Rapson, FAIA, MAF Past President, RRTSA Committee member
- **Lane Rapson, AIA** – Grandson of Ralph Rapson, FAIA, RRTSA Committee member
- **Jennifer Yoos, FAIA** – Head of the School of Architecture, University of Minnesota

AIA MINNESOTA STAFF SUPPORTING THE RRTSA TASK FORCE:

- **Mary-Margaret Zindren, CAE** – MAF Executive Director, facilitator
- **Amber Allardyce, CAE, Hon. AIAMN** – AIA Minnesota staff liaison to the MAF

The Task Force met five times between October 2022 and January 2023. An AIA Minnesota member RRTSA survey was conducted in September 2022 that provided valuable information to the Task Force. Based upon the review of survey results and structured discussions over the five meetings, the Task Force developed the following recommendations for the RRTSA going forward. (See the section following *Task Force Recommendations for context and background on the work of the task force.*)

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS:

I. Honor Ralph Rapson: Honor his legacy & embrace the spirit he brought to his life and work.

- A spirit of discovery.
- Excellence as an outcome of rigorous design process.
- Creativity as the product of hard work and collaboration.
- Support, mentorship, and warmth.
- Accessibility, flexibility, and humor.
- Lack of ego.

2. Purpose & Vision: Be true to the original purpose and vision of the award while evolving it to ensure strength and relevance into the future.

- Competition as a vehicle to choosing an individual to benefit from design inspiration and deeper understanding through travel study.
- Hold tightly to these aspects of the RRTSA that are longstanding:
 - The Award is named for Ralph Rapson.
 - Focus on discovery through travel-based study.
 - Employ a juried competition approach.
 - Limit participation to individual competitors.
 - Participants must have affiliation with Minnesota.
 - Competition conducted over an intensive timeframe.
 - Provide opportunities for learning and growth for new practitioners / those recently out of architecture school.
 - Develop briefs that foster innovation in design discourse; cultivate relevance, future orientation, and prescience.
 - Encourage participants to bring forward inventive design solutions that have a strong conceptual basis.
 - Focus on the clear articulation of design process.
 - Encourage the use of analog media and craft.
 - Recognize that what is relevant now was true of what Ralph Rapson valued in his day: innovation, materials, design excellence, interdisciplinary vision, and working at all scales (from furniture to cities).
 - Emphasize the social and environmental aspects of excellence in design. Bring attention to social responsibility and humanitarian challenges.
- Increase strength and relevance of the Award:
 - Overall, don't hold tightly to the specifics of the structure and logistics. Focus more on Ralph Rapson's ideas, principles, and aspirations.
 - Ensure equitable demographic representation in the jury.
 - Reinforce AIA's strategic priorities (e.g., climate action and equity) and definition of design excellence (e.g., the AIA Framework for Design Excellence) in the brief, the criteria, and jurying.
 - Extend the number of days for the competition – short enough to be intensive and long enough to recognize issues of equity related to caregiving responsibilities, different levels of firm support, etc.
 - Support ongoing evolution and experimentation in such areas as:
 - How Minnesota affiliation is defined.
 - The definition of “young architect” – in terms of demographics and experience levels.
 - The nature of a design charette – it has changed significantly since Ralph Rapson's time and will continue to evolve, especially as greater attention is paid to human-centered practices and wellness.

3. Brief Preparation: Ensure that the brief is accessible and relevant.

Develop brief in a collaborative manner over an extended period of time to allow time for the following areas of priority attention:

- Tie back to Ralph Rapson – the spirit he brought to his life and work, his personal philosophy, etc.
- Being locally based in Minnesota.
- Fostering strong alignment with the MAF mission and values, AIA Framework for Design Excellence, subject and theme of the brief, selection of who is involved in developing the brief, and selection of jury members. Ensure involvement of one or more members of the MAF Board in brief development.
- Reflecting meaningful engagement of a variety of people who have informed perspectives relevant to the focus of the brief, ideally including constituents in the area of impact.
 - The principle of “Not for us without us” needs to be respected in the brief development process.
- Recognition that the RRTSA is unlikely to solve complex social and environmental issues but that it can and should bring these issues to the fore and further their discourse and exploration.
- Writing in accessible language (avoiding an overly academic or heady style). Engage the assistance of a non-architect.
- Prioritize drafting of the brief being done by someone who has deep knowledge of the subject of the brief.
- Open-ended enough to prompt creative thinking; avoid being overly prescriptive or suggesting a manner of how to address the brief.
 - Set stage for participants to perform based on their perspectives in a fair and open-ended way.
 - Allow for a variety of submission types within fairly loose parameters.
 - Focus on creating the opportunity for participants to express themselves (rather than brief developers expressing themselves).
- Keeping two key audiences in mind: the RRTSA participants and the jurors.
- Require all participants to fill out an anonymous assessment of the brief, with future briefs informed by feedback.

4. Process & Juries: Cultivate processes and juries that inspire participants and foster their growth and their repeat engagement in the RRTSA.

- Embrace transparency, intentionality, and planfulness related to the RRTSA process.
- Provide clarity and transparency in terms of the criteria jurors will use to judge submissions, as part of the brief.
- Conduct outreach to help more people see themselves pursuing the RRTSA.
 - Host annual open house where prospective participants can learn about the RRTSA program and its priorities and parameters.
- To ensure integrity in the process, do not announce the jurors in advance of the competition, so they cannot be researched and catered to. Do share in advance the attributes reflected in the jury composition for that particular year in a manner that does not share or make it easy to deduce the names of jurors (*e.g., landscape architect, neighborhood leader, recognized expert in regenerative design, past AIA YAA winner*).
- The jury is ideally limited to four individuals, reflecting at the very least the population of Minnesota in terms of representation of women (50%) and people of color (22%).

- The jury of four, demographically diverse individuals should include some combination of individuals with the following attributes – which can include people from outside Minnesota and where a single individual can reflect multiple desired attributes – composed with the focus of the brief in mind:
 - Well-recognized architect who has been practicing 10 years plus (e.g., FAIA) – required of at least one juror
 - Specific experience/expertise related to the brief (community member, academic, etc.) – required of at least one juror
 - Well-known practitioner from an affiliated field (e.g., landscape architecture, urban planning, development, interior design, graphic design)
 - Well-recognized architect in the first 10 years of practice who is no longer eligible to participate in the RRTSA due to age (e.g., past 40 under 40 winner, AIA Young Architect Award recipient); and/or
 - Previous RRTSA recipient or finalist who is no longer eligible for the competition due to age.
- Provide the brief to jurors at least two weeks before jurying.
- Jurying location / approach can vary based on the geography of jurors selected and availability – all in-person, all via Zoom, or in hybrid fashion (all in-person jurying may unnecessarily restrict the jury pool).
- Require jurors to provide notes on each submittal, sharing them confidentially with participants with the intention of encouraging individual professional development and repeat submittals to the RRTSA.
- Reveal the names of jurors after recipients are announced.
- Provide information to all participants on why finalists and recipients were selected.
- Put out a call annually for suggestions for potential jurors. This is especially helpful if the general theme of the brief can be identified well in advance, and if the process allows for Zoom-based engagement in jurying.

5. Selection & Celebration: Leverage recipient selection and celebration to build community.

- Operate with the spirit of wanting all participants to feel like they got something good out of the experience and that it was worth their time to engage in the competition; where even if they didn't win or weren't a finalist, they still feel that they had a positive growth opportunity and were energized by participating.
- In addition to each participant receiving juror notes (see previous section), create opportunities for jurors to share their comments on the finalists' submittals in an open CE session (potentially recorded), in collaboration with AIA Minnesota. Share this same information (i.e., book jacket blurb in length) on the MAF website.
- Award finalists a stipend (e.g., \$500-\$1,000), creating more opportunities for participants to feel rewarded for their efforts. (This change would also likely make a dinner event to which finalists are invited and the recipient is announced – the longstanding approach – less awkward for finalists, as finalists will know that they are at least receiving a cash award.)
- Consider changing the language from “Finalists” to “Honorable Mention” recipients.

- At end of the competition, the MAF could pull together a social event for all participants where they have the opportunity to share their entries. Encourage the broader architecture community to show up to the event as well. Potentially leverage such an event to also be a fundraiser for the Rapson Fund.
- Celebrate all participants and bring greater attention to the finalists and recipient, acknowledging the effort it takes to compete. Broaden outreach beyond the MAF website to include AIA Minnesota partners (e.g., the Star Tribune) and online media (e.g., e-Flux, the Architects' Newspaper, etc.).

6. *Timing & Duration: Solidify timing and extend the planning and competition timeframes.*

Work related to the RRTSA should be ongoing throughout the year, rather than preparations squeezed into a tight timeframe. Expand time for the competition while remaining within a relatively limited time period.

- Provide more time for potential participants to clear their personal calendars by announcing the date of the following year's competition at the same time when the RRTSA recipients are announced.
- Allow more time for the preparation of the brief and for jury recruitment – active engagement of the RRTSA committee and others for a six-month period leading up to the competition.
- Keep the longstanding time of year for the competition: the Spring – earlier than Spring Break times for Minnesota's K-12 schools and avoiding major holidays of the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faiths for the timing of the competition and any other RRTSA events.
- Extend the time period for the competition; between 10 and 14 days.

Next Steps:

The Task Force suggests that the MAF Board of Directors take action on these recommendations at its January 2023 meeting. Note that it will not be possible to adopt many of the recommendations for the 2023 RRTSA competition. Staff would work with RRTSA Committee members to determine what is practicable.

Implementation of several of the recommendations would require additional, expanded efforts. With staff time constrained, recruitment of volunteers to support this work and assist with project management will be essential. Even with additional volunteer assistance, added staff time is likely required and therefore should prompt revisiting the MAF affiliate fee. Beyond the financial impact of adding stipends for finalists/honorable mention recipients (which the Task Force believes can be achieved with little impact on the financial award to the RRTSA competition winner), anticipated hard costs affiliated with the recommendations are anticipated to be minimal.

Also note that any recommendations adopted by the MAF Board of Directors would need to be reflected in revisions to the RRTSA Committee charter.

CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

MEETINGS

October 17th – Introductions, Overview, and Parameters

October 31st – History & Legacy

December 5th – Application Requirements & Program Brief

December 19th – Timing & Length of Competition

January 9th – Recommendation Refinement

For each meeting of the RRTSA Task Force, the results of the AIA Minnesota member survey focused on the RRTSA (conducted in September 2022) were shared ([full results here](#)), with particular emphasis on survey responses relevant to the topic of focus for the meeting. Additional relevant context shared with Task Force members included:

- [Charter of the RRTSA Committee](#) of the MAF (adopted in 2021)
- A [History and Overview](#) of the MAF (as of 2017)
- Copies of the book *Ralph Rapson: Sixty Years of Modern Design* by Jane King Hession (generously provided by Toby Rapson)
- A [summary document from Cranbrook](#) where Ralph Rapson’s papers are archived (shared by Jennifer Yoos)
- RRTSA program briefs for the past 10 years

DECISION-MAKING & CONFIDENTIALITY

- The MAF board is the body responsible for the stewardship and ongoing fulfillment of the goals of the RRTSA. They have this fiduciary duty, under law, and are therefore the appropriate decision-making body to review and potentially adopt any recommendations resulting from the work of the RRTSA Task Force.
- The RRTSA Task Force discussed at the outset of their work how they would approach decision-making and determined the following:
 - They would aim for consensus decisions.
 - Where consensus was not possible, they would take votes with a supermajority of 6 or more prevailing.
 - Those who feel strongly opposed to a recommendation approved by supermajority vote could ask for their concerns to be noted to the MAF Board of Directors.
 - If votes were split or by a majority of one, the item in question would be noted as an area where the task force was unable to reach a recommendation.

Note: all recommendations in this report were the result of consensus decisions of the Task Force.

- To support frank and open discussion among Task Force members, exploration of various options, and the possibility of perspectives changing over the course of the work of the Task Force, members agreed to keep the deliberations of the Task Force confidential.

MISSION & VALUES ALIGNMENT

Because the MAF is the responsible entity for the RRTSA, its mission should be kept in mind:
Investing in discovery, excellence, leadership, and equity.

Because AIA Minnesota has governance control of the MAF (the MAF is its charitable arm), AIA Minnesota's mission should be kept in mind:
Advancing a vital profession, vibrant communities, and architecture that endures.

Similarly, the shared core values of AIA Minnesota and the MAF should be kept in mind:

- Authenticity
- Equity
- Collaboration
- Integrity

INTENTIONS OF TASK FORCE MEMBERS

The RRTSA Task Force also established that, as they worked together, they needed to recognize and respect all that each Task Force member was bringing to the work of the group -- their varied intentions, life experiences, and aspects of who they are. And that they would work to bridge toward each other and develop a set of recommendations they can stand behind, with integrity. Intentions of Task Force members included:

- To ensure the RRTSA remains impactful and relevant for years to come.
- To be a good steward of the program.
- To honor the memory and be true to the legacy of Ralph Rapson, and to better understand, clarify, and build upon that legacy in the context of today's profession.
- To not to lose the initial goals of the award, including promoting travel and expanding horizons.
- To make sure the program is in alignment with the mission, values, and priorities of the MAF and of AIA Minnesota. (The MAF is the philanthropic arm of AIA Minnesota).
- To expand the representation and reach of the competition, including for women to see themselves represented in the various aspects of the program.
- To discuss and remedy barriers to entry and to eliminate friction points in a manner that allows many more people to participate in the program.
- To support and lift up growth in our architecture community.
- For the competition to push the dialogue around how we see architecture and the built environment in this day and age – beyond what architects and architectural designers have been trained to see.
- To listen and to learn.
- To engage in thoughtful discussion.

DONOR INTENT

The core elements of the RRTSA program that relate to donor intent – how the RRTSA has been described in fundraising efforts – are the following and likely could not be changed without new dollars generated through a new fundraising campaign:

- Honoring the legacy of Ralph Rapson
- Involving a travel study award
- Connection to both the Minnesota-based architecture community and the University of Minnesota

To date, the MAF Board of Directors has not discussed divergence from any of these three aspects of the Award or a new capital campaign focused on the Award. Therefore, for the purposes of the work of the RRTSA task force, all three of these aspects of the Award program were assumed to remain.

CORE QUESTIONS CONSIDERED BY THE TASK FORCE

In the facilitation of the work of the Task Force, the following core questions were explored:

- **What of the spirit of Ralph Rapson would ideally be reflected in the RRTSA going forward?**
- **What should be held tightly and what should be held more lightly related to history and legacy in order to be true to the purpose and vision of the award while ensuring its strength and relevance into the future?**
- **Regarding the brief: What makes for a successful/unsuccessful brief? What should the goals be for the brief? What processes for developing the brief would best support these goals being met? Who should be involved in development of the brief and in what ways?**
- **Are there any aspects of the application process or eligibility criteria that you think should be revised?**
- **What should be the key considerations for setting the timing of the release of the prompt and the submittal of a response?**
- **What considerations should drive the composition of the jury?**
- **How do we want participants, finalists, and winners to feel about the outcomes of the selection process? And how well does the current approach of communicating and celebrating the outcomes align with those intentions?**