



Camp Paradise

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Now that we've shaken off the dust from the spate of annual summer conventions, it's time to take a breather and reflect on which conferences made a difference for us, and which were merely exercises in stamina.

Perhaps it is the fog, which envelops the pines in lush coolness. Perhaps it is the remote site beside the sea, a 3-hour drive from urbane San Francisco. Whatever the rationale, California's Monterey Design Conference takes you out of your workaday self and sets you in a rarified state of mind. For a number of years, California architects have looked forward to this event, a biennial gathering on the green fringe of paradise, as a two-and-a-half-day design fest. Monterey Design qualifies as a retreat in the most positive sense: a gathering of like minds in a rustic setting, removed from distractions and focused on a central topic.

Other design conferences, including Aspen's more celebrated version, have been at the creativity business longer, mixing the design disciplines up in transcendent settings, though few can sport 600 dedicated architects all in one place. At the other extreme, Monterey's more businesslike kin, the traditional convention or trade show, demand a certain busyness mixed with business—a juggling act, balancing seminars on serious topics with self-help courses, canned speeches with spontaneous encounters. We've all been there. In Monterey, however, you cannot get that busy: Cell phones and laptops and fax machines simply don't work well so far down the road. Unplugging from the grid is part of the point.

Nothing succeeds like simplicity. Sited in Pacific Grove, California, along the sublime Pacific and occupying a rambling shingled series of wood-framed structures formerly housing a YWCA camp (part of which had been designed by Julia Morgan in 1913), the conference invites you to shuck off your cool quotient, slip on a pair of jeans, and kick back. Think Haystack School meets über design camp. Meals are served in a cavernous cafeteria, but with wine (it is California, after all). Like summer camp, rooms lack cooling, relying on Pacific breezes, which waft in from the sea. The stars fill the night sky. They show movies before bedtime.

All day long, halfway up a hillside in a former gym, the architects feast on design. From morning on into the night, a packed house shares the intimacy of a darkened hall, where ideas flow like water. The crowd includes a seasoned blend of professionals, a mixed salad of the green with the famous. After breaks for the intermittent sunshine, they hustle back inside for presentations and discussions (this year's topic was "Doing Good"), including those by an anointed few—a small group of younger, lesser-known architects from a half-dozen offices tapped as "emerging talent." Based loosely on the Emerging Voices series initiated by New York's Architectural League, California's hybrid version blooms just this once, every two years.

Throughout a full conference day, interspersed among the stars and the formal discourses, younger architects get center stage. To see them laying out their own philosophies and design decisions before former employers and future collaborators creates a kind of magic—something you might have misplaced back in school, here resurrected and shining. Their invigorating ideas provide a tonic for those of us more seasoned or cynical about the state of practice. The emerging talent alone is worth the ticket price.

Other architectural organizations could learn from the Monterey Design Conference. Power-packed, perhaps too tightly scheduled, the time at Monterey races by. When we were young, camp came and went, leaving us ready for school, but with the taste of summer as deep as our tans. Like camp, Monterey lingers, but not nostalgically or superficially: This conference leaves you with a fundamental, energetic kick. Part of its joy lies in anticipating a repeat experience, same time, two years later.

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