Recent highlights from the Ideas blog

Brainiac; Design award for the Burke

Boston Globe - Boston, Mass.
Author: Shea, Christopher
Date: Feb 14, 2010
Start Page: n/a
Section: Sunday
Text Word Count: 681

Document Text

Architectural record recently named the renovated Jeremiah E. Burke High School in Dorchester one of its "Schools of the 21st Century," singling out the artful way the architects - Boston-based Schwartz/Silver - combined the original Art Deco building with an addition that includes a gym lit by expanses of glass, a public library, and a community center.

In the addition, a basketball court sits on the top floor, isolated from the lower levels by two concrete floor slabs, one of them on sound-deadening springs. The public library branch and a community "living room" occupy the first floor, and sandwiched in between is the school library. When the school day ends, that library opens to the community. The first two levels are linked by a long run of open stairs, accented with red laminated glass affixed to the railings.

Making bar fights safer

British industrial designers are tackling a grim subset of alcohol-related violence: so-called glassing injuries, caused when a pint glass is smashed against someone's head or body. One hundred such injuries are reported to police each weekend in Britain, and, judging from hospital admissions, seven times that number may go unreported.

As part of a government and industry project called Design Out Crime, the firm Design Bridge has developed two prototype pint glasses intended to make pub violence less lethal. (Plastic pint glasses are an obvious option, but drinkers find them gauche.) In the first, a thin film of resin would be affixed to the inside of every glass. In the second, resin would be used to bind two thin layers of glass to each another. In both cases, the glasses become much more sturdy and, when they do break, they break like windshields, with the glass remaining bound together in small bits - no dangerous shards.

As a bonus, the resin would provide new "branding opportunities": logos and slogans printed on the reinforcing plastic would be shielded from wear and tear.

Brakes vs. accelerator: which wins?

A stuck accelerator is a terrifying prospect, but an article in Car and Driver provides some counterintuitive solace: Modern brakes will still stop the vehicle. In fact, somewhat amazingly, the magazine's editors say that unless you're driving an outlandishly powerful sports car, brakes will stop your vehicle nearly as quickly as if the gas pedal were not stuck.

To test their faith in brake power, the editors rounded up a V-6 Toyota Camry (one of the vehicles Toyota has recalled), a sportier Infiniti G37, and, for an extreme example, a V-8 Ford Mustang modified to produce 540 horsepower.

With the Camry's accelerator pinned to the floor at 70 miles per hour, the driver of the Camry was still able to bring it to a stop in just 190 feet, a foot less than a Ford Taurus without its gas pedal

depressed, according to the article. The results for the Infiniti were similar: That car took 170 feet to go from 70 to 0 under the out-of-control accelerator condition, compared to the usual 161 feet - a mere 6 percent difference.

Brakes will stop a vehicle with a stuck gas pedal even at 100 miles per hour, Car and Driver found. The magazine's driver stopped the Camry going that speed, with the gas pedal floored, in 435 feet. Without a depressed gas pedal, the figure was 347 feet. (The numbers for the Infiniti were an even-more-impressive 326 feet vs. 320 feet.)

Only at the outer limits of engine power can modern cars come close to overpowering their brakes, it seems. The 540-horsepower Mustang took a full 903 feet to stop from 100 miles per hour with the gas pedal jammed, compared to 324 feet without.

Car and Driver does not excuse Toyota: It says that the manufacturer was slow to adopt industry-standard technology that cuts off the gas when brakes are applied. The company has pledged to make that change.

Incidentally, should you find yourself in a runaway car, the best strategy is to shift to neutral while braking.

Christopher Shea is a weekly columnist for Ideas. He can be reached at brainiac.email@gmail.com.

Abstract (Document Summary)

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