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To whom this may concern

*Re: The future of competitions – tell them what they need*

There are various issues at large which demand an engagement with the topic in a way that is differentiated rather than polemic. That's why this comes neither as manifesto nor as an SMS but as a letter.

It is clear that architectural competitions are a complex beast – they operate on various levels and are organised for various purposes. There are ideas competitions and design-build competitions; there are closed and open competitions; tiered competitions; and, competitions which are rather like a forum or a workshop. The list goes on. It is all too easy to forget, too, that competitions also function differently in different countries. The 'tradition' for organising and running competitions is different in each and every European country.

For each of these types of competition there is a different set of questions, but you might be able to take a broad view on some. Two of the key issues would relate to the questions as to what competitions are for and whom they serve.

What are competitions for, then?

We initially assumed this answer to be relatively straight forward, but it turns out that it is not as easy.

Architectural competitions were pushed in particularly in the 1970s because of a belief that, as Magali Sarfatti Larson wrote in 1994, "the open selection of architects and designs gives the public and the press a better chance to defend the built and unbuilt environment" and subsequently, the number of competitions from the mid 1970s to 1980s increased by as much as one thousand percent. Competitions were therefore pushed not least as a reaction to the writings of people such as Jane Jacobs in order to make the production of the built environment a potentially more democratic environment. Yet, only a fraction of architectural firms participate in competitions: the American sociologist Robert Gutman pointed out that, in the US context, it might only be 1 or 2 percent of all registered practices. Sarfatti Larsson talks about those that participate in any form of competition as "consenting victims", summarising the myths and hopes surrounding architectural competitions much better than we could do here.

What remains largely untouched in any discourse about architectural competitions, whether it is regarded as a means to achieve fame over night or as exploitation of free labour, is the question of whom these processes serve versus whom they are supposed to serve. It seems that it might be here that some of the potential for redressing your questions about architectural competitions lie.

It is important to be clear about the profession or discipline of architecture. It is not only competition architecture, but architecture as such and increasingly architectural education that has become a service provision. Architects, and this has been noted elsewhere, often only react or respond to given briefs and questions. They, typically, are not initiators; they don't take their 'fate' into their own hands, but wait for that perfect job (or competition) to come their way. Competitions in this context become a means for architects to prove themselves through architecture as object. Yes, it is also about finding the 'best' solution and, yes, the schemes also have, well, somebody's best interest at heart. But whose interest is this, really? Who writes the brief? Who provides the prize money? Who pays for the competition to take place in the first instance?

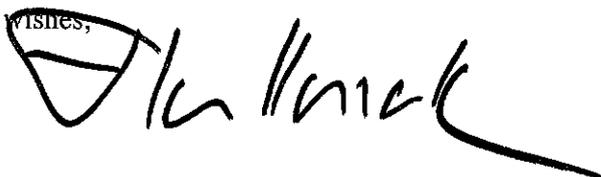
By now, we have fallen into the same trap that we set out to challenge: generalising. Nevertheless, these questions seem crucial also to you and your own competition. Why are you interested in this? Whose interest do you have at heart? Who is the target of your scorn? But also, who would you work with to put the constructive propositions into action? It surely can't be just through another internalised circle of chosen 'experts'?

I'm not sure who the collective enemy ('THEY') is, but rescuing architecture from its momentary seemingly hopeless position certainly can't be done in a bubble and it looks as if, to paraphrase Jeremy Till, architects fiddle while the world burns and, this time, they fiddle with competitions.

Do we / does architecture / do architects need competitions? Do they have potential? Well, you do believe they have – you ask "how to return to a condition where competitions generate ideas rather than simply deliver solutions" – but we must say that we are undecided whether they are useful or not, whether in their present or a likely reimagined form. What seems to be more prescient is a constructive engagement through and with architecture and its relevance both as idea but also as action (which includes the production of space).

How can this be done? Through redefining architectural engagement, through finding scope for architecture beyond mere service provision. But surely, this is not limited to architecture competitions, as we pointed out. It is something that needs to be addressed in a more holistic way taking into account the wider network of producers and users.

Best wishes,

  
Tanja Schneider