

Introduction

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When it comes to the role of the architectural competition in shaping our built environment, there are almost as many conclusions as there are competitions. This conference held on November 17 and 18, 2005, co-sponsored by the Van Alen Institute and the Woodrow Wilson School's Policy Institute for the Region as well as the Princeton School of Architecture, demonstrated both how anecdotal the information regarding competitions is, and also how eager people are to put together better scholarship on the matter.

The topic is a timely one; perhaps never before in the recent history of the United States has the architectural competition gained such widespread public attention. At the same time, there is confusion over the role of the competition itself and how it translates into the built piece of work. That process is a complex one, and is the driving force behind bringing policymakers, developers, designers, planners, researchers, and students into discussion with one another.

To architects, the role of the competition is first and foremost to advance the discourse of the discipline. The mechanism of the competition allows architects to engage in a dialogue

about where to move the field itself, using the competition brief as an opportunity to stimulate and advance their own design ideology. This is also why the other entrants in the field for a given competition are so important; to an architect, a competition is not always about winning, but rather about the opportunity to engage in a high-profile discourse with other members of the design community. The open public competition is also an opportunity for young architects to make a name for themselves, to gain the recognition that is so essential to building a practice. At least in the United States, however, the competition is not an opportunity for architects to make money for all the work they put in. Architects routinely spend much more money entering competitions than they make back, even if they are declared the eventual winner.

To a planner or policymaker, the competition is about seeking a variety of solutions to what is often a complex urban problem. A competition can also be a vital step in garnering stakeholder and public support for a project that may still be in need of funding and approvals in order to be realized. The competition, with its strong overtones of democratic process and meritocracy, carries widespread appeal from a civic point of view, and also gives public officials many different creative solutions to the proposed design problem for very little

upfront cost. The power of an open competition to generate public support for a project is powerfully evinced in keynote speaker Robert Hammond's story of the High Line Competition for New York City.

Meanwhile, the utility of the competition for the developer is a bit murkier. As a private client, the need to build broader support for a project is not always there. Often a private client has a set of guidelines for the project that they are unwilling to compromise on, which makes the typical open competition structure less useful to them. At the same time, if the project is a particularly large or high-profile endeavor, there are often public entities that will be interested in running a competition for the site, despite not necessarily having jurisdiction or control over the site. As a result, developers are often more interested in what are called invited competitions, where a pre-selected group of firms submit proposals.

A theme that emerged again and again throughout the day's events is how essential the competition brief is in making the competition a success for all three of the above-mentioned parties. How a competition is run in the beginning makes all the difference in how ultimately successful is the outcome. A carefully researched and planned brief, alongside a representative and knowledgeable jury, is indispensable to the endeavor. The more clearly the stakeholders can define their positions, the better equipped designers are to understand the motivations that are at work and to present solutions that work. The earlier that the client is forced to define the issues at stake, the sooner they can start working

towards getting all the necessary components together to ensure the project's realization.

How can all these parties start to engage in a more fruitful exchange with one another? Assuming design excellence as the ultimate objective, this conference was organized in order to first understand how political and economic forces shape competitions for public projects and how they are realized. To address these questions, three papers were specially commissioned for this conference. In the morning session, H el ene Lipstadt, a founding director and current secretary of the National Board of DOcumentation and COnservation of buildings, sites, and neighborhoods of the MODern MOvement (DOCOMOMO), provided an overview of design competitions in the United States in her paper, "The Competition in the Region's Past, the Region in the Competition's Future." She argues that in order to change the existing U.S. model of competitions, it is first necessary to define and describe competitions as they now exist; to raise the bar of excellence we must identify those competitions that already do, and work from their model. Lipstadt sets out a rigorous historical analysis and proposes a method to develop a new standard for U.S. competitions, under the moniker of intelligent design competitions. Next in the morning session was Lynne B. Sagalyn, professor of real estate development and planning at the University of Pennsylvania. Her paper, "The Political Fabric of Design Competitions," provided an incisive and revealing examination of the political motivations behind design competitions, using several high-profile competitions in New York City as case studies.

The second objective of this conference, after the investigation into the U.S. model of design competitions and the forces that shape them, was to turn to other countries to seek best practices and build an understanding of what we might learn from them and integrate into U.S. practice. Mels Crouwel, principal at Ben-them Crouwel and chief government architect of the Netherlands, started off the conversation with a presentation of his work and experience in competitions in Europe. Deyan Sudjic, dean of the faculty of Art, Design, and Architecture at Kingston University then presented his paper "Competitions, the Pitfalls and the Potential," which was followed by Richard Burdett, the Centennial Professor in Architecture and Urbanism at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and director of Urban Age. Together they provide fertile material for a comparison of interna-

tional and American models of competition and lay the groundwork for a best practices analysis across political and economic systems.

One central observation that kept reoccurring was how anecdotal the information regarding competitions truly is. This means that themes across the conference are just beginning to emerge, but one of the most essential is certainly the role of communication: between architect and client, between policymaker and developer, between the brief and the design. This volume is only a first step in improving those dialogues. The papers and the panel discussions that follow reveal the vocabulary that matters to each of these different stakeholders in design competitions, and hopefully brings us a step closer to realizing truly great public design projects.