

Competitions: The Pitfalls and the Potential

Deyan Sudjic
Kingston University, London

The modern architectural competition has a long and distinguished history, going back at least to the 18th century, when Thomas Jefferson suggested it as the most appropriate means of selecting a design for Washington's Capitol.¹ A little later the new Palace of Westminster was also the subject of a competition when the British houses of parliament were destroyed by fire in 1832. Such architectural competitions were understood as the right way to find the best possible design for these key public commissions. They were self-conscious attempts to create landmarks of national and international significance, and seemed to demand the special scrutiny of a competition. It was a procedure that took several stages to reach fruition in the case of the Capitol. In London the competition succeeded brilliantly in identifying a deserving candidate—or rather candidates—for the job of carrying out the project, and in producing richly resonant, powerful designs. These two cases highlight both the potential and the limitations of competitions. In Washington, it wasn't until Latrobe began work that America finally had an architect who measured up to the task asked of him. In London, Charles Barry was forced by the terms of the competition

to abandon the urbane classicism that came naturally to him as a means of architectural expression, and to adopt a gothic style instead.

Gothic was seen as the most truly British national style by the parliamentary committee charged with overseeing the process.² To create it, Barry called on the help of AWN Pugin as a specialist collaborator. And Pugin covered his professional options by working for at least one other competitor on an alternative scheme in case Barry didn't win.³ In Britain, the introduction of the competition system was a natural accompaniment to the reform of the country's public administration, a reform aimed at rooting out corruption, nepotism, and incompetence, and the establishment in its place of a professional civil service open to the most talented, whatever their connections or origins. They were selected on merit through a system of competitive public examinations. Architectural competitions in Britain could in part be seen as some kind of antidote to the power of the political connections that were the basis on which so many 18th century architectural careers had been built. That had been a period when architects were either Whigs or Tories. Sir Robert Taylor, George Dance, and Sir John Soane all depended on who they knew to ensure a steady supply of work. It's a practice that is still more or less overtly prevalent in Italy today, where most major architects

have clear political ties, and depend on them for work. And it is not uncommon elsewhere, though not always in such an overt way as is the practice in Milan and Rome. John Nash's large scale remodeling of London was possible only because of the closeness of his relationship with the Prince Regent. Scandal mongers even suggested that he took on an illegitimate royal offspring to oblige his patron.

As a system, it may have been corrupt—and a House of Commons appalled at the constant cost escalation of Nash's rebuilding of Buckingham Palace for his patron noisily claimed that it was—but it did not seem to have damaged the architectural quality of public building.⁴ That is not from an objective view point, but in the 18th century architectural criticism and political commentary were indistinguishable. As one party supplanted its rivals, so their architecture was comprehensively attacked and their architects removed from the fount of patronage.

As can be seen in present day Italy, in which the fall out from the scandals of the Tagen-topoli system are all too visible, the role that competitions are perceived to play in eradicating corruption in the award of public contracts is still a major factor in their adoption. Indeed throughout the European Union, an element of competition is now mandatory in the procurement of buildings and infrastructure, and competitions have had a new lease of life as a result. They have spread from those states such as Germany, Holland and Spain, where they have a long history, to Italy, where they are still problematic. In England, where despite their popularity in the 19th century when they were seen as the natural way for

ambitious Victorian cities to build the swaggering law courts, civic museums and city halls that reflected their fierce sense of local pride and identity, they have been more sporadic in recent times. In part perhaps, because of the perceived failure of several high profile competitions to achieve a satisfactory result.

In the 1970s, plans to build a parliamentary extension to the Palace of Westminster went to a competition that was won with an innovative design by a young practice, Spence and Webster. The project was killed off, nominally by a government spending freeze, but in reality because the architecture was judged as too radical for Britain's political class at the time. In the 1980s, the competition to extend the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square ended in chaos with the intervention of the Prince of Wales, determined to impose his view over that of the judges.

The prince eventually succeeded in giving Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown their only British commission. Despite this hiatus, and despite the continual complaints about the cost to competitors involved in taking part in competitions, they remain popular with European architects and with American architects practicing in Europe who have benefited from them in no small measure. It is their potential as an instrument for cultural engineering that may help to explain the enthusiasm that the architectural profession in so many countries have developed for the competition system. The competition has been adopted not just by mayors and ministers, but also by the private sector. Commercial developers are now increasingly likely to use them as a means

of selecting their architects. And in many European countries, architects have established their working methods on this basis. The typical pattern in Spain for example, is for a close connection between teaching and practice. Younger architects support themselves by teaching, in order to build up the visibility to be invited to take part in competitions. When they win a commission in one, they will often employ former students to boost their studio manpower, and concentrate on their practice for a while, then later go back to teaching. It is a mutually beneficial relationship which allows for practice to inform theory, and theory to shape practice in a manner which has produced a thriving and vigorous architectural culture.

Public architecture can be understood as a reflection of a culture's view of itself. It's a means of demonstrating what a community sees as important, of projecting a sense of its values to itself, and to the outside world. It can be understood as a kind of branding, as well as a pursuit of excellence for its own sake. And a competition is seen as a clear way of acknowledging that understanding and the importance of architecture's cultural role. A competitive process is a means of drawing public attention to a project. It is a way to trigger a debate about the characteristics of a significant project and to make clear the criteria by which a decision was made. A competition implies the use of experts with no personal or professional stake in a project to help make decisions according to the defined criteria, of which one is architectural excellence.

Competitions are regarded within the architectural world almost as motherhood and

apple pie issues, concepts that nobody could reasonably question, presented as good deeds in an unkind world. They are understood as an expression of disinterested commitment to quality. It's hard to argue in the face of the many major examples of competition winning buildings that have served to define the architectural history of the 20th century. But it is worth interrogating at least for a while, the received wisdom that competitions are uncomplicatedly good things.

Sydney's Opera House and the Pompidou Centre in Paris are the two most ubiquitously cited examples of competition-winning designs, two epoch-shaping buildings from successive decades. Both are the product of an architectural competition that took a very similar form. Entry was open to any qualified architect. For the price of the postage—and the huge investment of time and energy, and effort needed to answer the demands of a tightly written and challenging technical brief—any architect, anywhere in the world had the chance of winning the commission to design and build a career defining work of architecture. In both cases hundreds of participants signed up to receive the brief, and submitted their drawings and models in the format specified in the competition conditions. It was 234 entries for Sydney. They took care to ensure that there was nothing on any of their drawings that would reveal their identity, except for a single identifying mark or number that could be used to tie the winner to the drawings once they had been selected by the judges. The mark would identify the sealed envelope that came with the submission that contained the name and address of the winner.⁵ There was a heart-

breaking case in Ireland a few years ago when U2 staged a competition to design a tower in Dublin. The judges selected a winner, but could not find the crucial identifying envelope. They ended up giving the commission to another architect, and it was only much later that the missing architect came forward having recognized his design from a newspaper article, by which time it was too late.⁶ There was no such problem in Sydney back in 1957 when Eero Saarinen and his fellow judges tore open the winning envelope and found that the cluster of shell segments that was to become one of the greatest architectural icons in the modern world was the work of a previously entirely unknown Dane by the name of Jorn Utzon.⁷

A decade later, Philip Johnson and Jean Prouve were able to persuade their fellow judges in Paris to go for one of the most radical of several hundred submissions for the building of a cultural complex next to the old Les Halles.

When they opened that envelope, they found that they had entrusted the most high-profile, and one of the most technically demanding new buildings in France since the Eiffel Tower, to an entirely unknown Italian called Renzo Piano, and Richard Rogers, an Englishman who had previously built nothing larger than a seaside house for his father-in-law.

These two projects might on one level be seen to be powerful advertisements for the idea of the architectural competition as a creative force. The two competitions lead to two extraordinarily successful buildings, architectural projects that could never have been conceivable in any other way. They trans-

formed the nature of architecture, they gave two cities their most characteristic new monuments, they pushed forward the definitions of opera houses and art galleries, and they kick-started at least three architectural careers. On the other hand, it could also be said that the Sydney decision was highly irresponsible. Certainly it was a project that Peter Hall, the distinguished urban scholar could include in the list of great planning disasters in his 1975 book of that name. An architect had been chosen to build a design that was evidently at the very limits of the technically possible, an architect who had done nothing to demonstrate that he had either the temperament or the skill to do it, and who in the end, proved himself paralyzed with indecision about how to deal with the structural resolution of the concrete shell roofs on which the building depended in a timely and economical manner. Utzon had been imposed on the government of New South Wales by a group of international architects who could walk away from the turbulence that was so quickly to ensue without taking any responsibility for the outcome.

Utzon famously resigned when the project reached the impasse that could have been predicted almost from the beginning. Finishing the building turned out to be enormously costly, grossly exceeding the original budget, and earning Australia an embarrassing reputation as not only incompetent in the way that it approached major construction projects, but also as dismayingly philistine in its cultural values. And it produced an opera house that was functionally fatally flawed. The compromise needed to fit the auditoria into the available space left by Utzon's structural premise

reduced the number of seats to below the acoustic and economic optimum. And the notoriety that the seeming fiasco attracted is very likely the primary cause of the protracted eclipse of the open competition that followed Sydney. On the other hand of course, the underlying sculptural idea that Utzon had put forward, turned out to be so powerful that it effortlessly survived the whole mess.⁸

It was a distinctive building, visible enough to allow Sydney to overtake Melbourne as the country's leading city, and even to transform the international perception of Australia. A city that had been invisible was made visible. The Pompidou Centre was built with less difficulty, though it too, turned out to be a rather different proposition from the one that the judges had selected. The idea of flexible gallery floors that could be moved up and down at will turned out to be not exactly what the curators who would program the building needed. Nor were they deliverable within the center's budget. In the more litigious age in which we now find ourselves, its not hard to contemplate the prospect of unsuccessful contestants turning to their lawyers to recover the costs of the thousands of man hours that they had poured into their efforts to win, only to be beaten by a scheme that turned out to be radically different from what was actually built. Indeed something close to that has already happened. The competition to transform the ruins of Berlin's Reichstag into a new parliament for a reunited Germany was won by Norman Foster, but the completed building looks utterly different from what the jury selected. Foster won with a design for a dramatic new roof that soared across the site, turning the original

structure into a fragment, clearly part of a new Germany.⁹

And he beat Santiago Calatrava to secure the job. But as the euphoria over reunification evaporated, Germany realized that it could not afford the cost of Foster's proposal. He was asked to suggest ways of cutting the cost to meet the budget that was now on offer. Foster was reluctant to water down a bold, and strikingly clear diagram. Better, he said to start again, and produce another solution altogether, than to compromise the concept.

Foster came under pressure from his clients to include a dome as part of the design. A dome had been a key part of the original building, and German politicians wanted to see a new one added to the design as a symbol of continuity. At first Foster resisted adopting an arbitrary architectural symbol that might be taken as a historical replica. Eventually he complied, having satisfied himself that it could be done in an appropriate way. But Santiago Calatrava, one of the unsuccessful competitors in the original competition was outraged. He had made a dome the centerpiece of his entry, and he saw Foster's new project as based on his own work.¹⁰

If the competition had been to find a parliament with a dome, why hadn't the victory been his? He threatened to sue for plagiarism, and embarked on an angry letter-writing campaign. Foster shrugged off the complaint, pointing out that of all the hundreds of domes in Germany that might offer a precedent for the Reichstag, why would he have taken Calatrava's.

The truth is that for every successful architectural competition, there is another that ends in embarrassment or worse. One of the most famous involved a notorious case of mistaken identity. The jury for the competition to select a design for the new Paris Opera house at La Bastille were under the impression that they had chosen the best of a lack luster field of submissions. They had high hopes for it, because from the drawing technique and the purified geometry of the design they believed they were dealing with a major international figure. These clues made the jury believe that the anonymous submission was the work of Richard Meier, and while it might not look immediately like one of his best works, they could be confident that once he was awarded the commission he would get to work to refine the project. But when the envelopes were opened they discovered that they had got it wrong. The circular drum, with its purist white skin was not a near relative of the High Museum in Atlanta as they had assumed. It was the product of an unknown Uruguayan practicing in Canada named Carlos Ott. The opera house was duly built, and remains a flawed project, even after the technical problems with its cladding system, and its malfunctioning mechanical stages had been resolved.¹¹

Richard Meier had a central role in another architectural competition, played by a very different set of rules that demonstrates another of the hazards facing participants. This was an invited competition to design a new city hall and library in The Hague. The judges knew who they were dealing with. The competitors had the chance to tailor their designs to an understanding of what their clients needed,

and what it would be like to work with them. And they choose Rem Koolhaas and his practice, OMA. But then Meier lobbied effectively enough for the selection to overturned, and to end up with the commission.¹²

For a variety of reasons, America in the last decade has not by and large been as welcoming to the leading edge of contemporary architecture as Europe and Japan. More often it is European and Japanese architects who have made the running rather than Americans. It is not that America lacks talented architects, and from Frank Gehry and Peter Eisenman, to Steven Holl and Thom Mayne, they are in demand around the world. But many of the most notable new buildings erected even in America itself are by European or Asian architects. One of the reasons for that situation may be the marginal place occupied by the architectural competition in America. Architectural cultures are a complex ecology: they require a mix of opportunity, and ability. In America there are insufficient opportunities for younger architects to make a mark, thanks in part to the lack of open competitions.

There are some architects who won't do competitions. Or at least who, like Frank Gehry, say they won't do competitions, even if they are sometimes prepared to indulge in a certain amount of hair-splitting about what precisely defines a competition. As Gehry made clear in his, in the event, entirely sensible decision not to take part in the fiasco that marked the selection process for the Ground Zero master plan, the competition is a means that young and ambitious emerging talents can use to establish themselves. It is rather less convinc-

ing as a vehicle for those whose work is well enough known already for it to be possible for an informed decision to be made on their suitability for a given project without asking them to negotiate another set of hoops. The Ground Zero case offers an insight into all the things that can go wrong with a competition. Here in the first place was a competition that wasn't really a competition, organized by a group that did not have unencumbered control of the site, or the process by which it would be rebuilt. Further, it was a competition with no clarity about who would actually make a final choice about who had won. Nor was there anything more than a derisory fee for taking part. Norman Foster, who responded to the challenge with one of the most powerful propositions of his career, is entirely believable when he says that the submission cost his office several million dollars.¹³

Not every architect wants to get involved. You can see their difficulty. An open competition requires the design of a complete answer to the brief. To do it justice, it demands a studio full of people, and all the usual consultants working flat out, pretending that they have got a job to build something, when there are dozens of other teams with exactly the same illusion. And that is not something that all architects feel comfortable about. According to the British architect John Pawson, who is seldom prepared to make competitive submissions, "Some people are able to make them feel as if they are real. A lot of studios are geared up to do nothing but win competitions. And they do it by approaching them as if they were working on an individual commission with all the single-mindedness that implies. I

find that difficult. A design produced in the circumstances of a competition would never be quite as grounded as working for a real client. I can't imagine the monastery we built in Novy Dvur for example, coming out of a competition. What we designed for the monks was the product of five years of continual interaction, and conversation and experience built up with a group who know exactly what the choreography that they needed was."¹⁴

When the decision to stage a competition could be narcissistic, architects have good reason to be cautious. A chance for the trustees of a failing museum to distract themselves for a brief interlude from the reality of falling visitor numbers or opportunity for an attention grabbing stunt for developers wanting to get noticed, much like the practice of film makers issuing an open casting call, is not a promising basis for a genuine commission. The competition conditions in these circumstances matter of course and the small print can be enormously significant. Le Corbusier was disqualified for using ink rather than the pencil specified in the competition conditions for the Palace of the League of Nations back in the 1920s.

One particular recent competition tells us a lot about how competitions and the psychology behind them can work. The 25 acres of the Beijing motorcycle factory, once so dear to loyal communist party hearts, have mostly been leveled now to allow Rem Koolhaas to build the new headquarters of Central China Television. When it is finished, in time for the Beijing Olympics in 2008, it will be a colossus; two leaning towers 70 floors high that prop

each other up to form a gigantic Mobius strip, packed with everything from studios to offices. In the years since Deng Xiaoping took the first steps toward unleashing China's economic potential, Beijing has built a vast number of new buildings, but hardly any have shown real architectural ambition. However, CCTV was looking for something more than simply another large building.

Koolhaas was invited to take part in a competition that was intended to produce something spectacular, but the competition was organized by people who had no idea what that something might be, even when they saw it. A building emerges from such a process as the product of a whole series of small decisions and accidents, as well as political lobbying and the manufacture of consensus. Not the least of those accidents was the choice of jurors. Among them was a close friend of Koolhaas, Charles Jencks. According to Jencks, whose book on postmodernism was first translated into Mandarin in 1986, "the rhetorical part of the brief was describing the Guggenheim in Bilbao. Though height was not mentioned, they clearly wanted a landmark." Jencks recalls his initial caution, "I was afraid of being duped, that whatever I said, would be used to endorse what might turn out to be a different outcome from the jury's decision." He tried to depoliticize what some see as an essentially political process. "I am here for architecture, independent of any other considerations," he announced the jury's opening session, a meeting full of silence with a room full of people, reluctant to voice opinions of any kind. "We were taken to a resort outside Beijing with an artificial lake. It felt like a British country house

in a Kansas wheat field. We were being isolated in a cocoon. It was building the mentality of a team, in a way that some people might find sinister," says Jencks. Behind the jury sat a whole row of officials taking notes. "There was the sense that if CCTV made the wrong decision, it would be tough on those who took that decision."¹⁵

The competition brief had been interpreted by two of the American architects taking part, who had between them designed Shanghai's two tallest buildings, the Jin Mao tower, with its tapering, supposedly Chinese geometry, and the knitting needle shaped Shanghai World Financial Centre, as an invitation to build another ultra-tall skyscraper in the same mold. Koolhaas won the competition because he didn't. "Rem saw at once that in a central business district with 300 towers, building the 301st tower is not going to create a landmark," Jencks explains.

Aware that a competition jury's verdict is never enough on its own to secure a project, Jencks set about organizing consent, marshaling arguments in favor of Koolhaas's design that would make its outlandish form seem acceptable to the Chinese hierarchy. He described the design in terms of its evocation of Chinese tradition—issues that Koolhaas had never mentioned in his presentation. "It's a Chinese moon gate, a framed howl, or the heavy shape made in bronze and jade thousands of years ago in China as a symbol of exchange". But Jencks wanted to cover other positive aspects of the design too, to make sure that he could not be outflanked by those arguing that China at this stage in its

development, should be looking forward and not back. It would be not just a Chinese icon, but would be understood in any culture. "It's a pop image, it can be seen as suggesting the Arc de Triomphe." The jury struggled to push a state corporation into spending more money than it had planned to, on a project that would stretch China's capabilities to the limit. Koolhaas himself knew that he would have to fight for the project which was clearly going to be more expensive to build than either of the two other front runners. Koolhaas got a local team of students to build a new model to make it easier for CCTV officials to understand what it was actually going to look like, and it was sent off on a tour of the villas of the particular hierarchy as part of a strenuous lobbying campaign.

How tense this process became is reflected in the many months that passed between the jury's decision and a public announcement, even a year after that, the foundation stone still hadn't been laid. Contrast this with the design of the new Beijing Olympic stadium. In an echo of Stalinist planning techniques, the date of the foundation stone laying ceremony was announced months in advance of a result in the competition to find an architect to design it.

Open competitions are, rightly or wrongly, presented as a risk for both established architects, and for anxious clients. Why would you put all that effort into a project that you have such poor odds of winning, and how does the promoter feel secure enough to put their trust into an unknown, with whom they have had no previous relationship? An unknown who they might not even like, and with whom they

have had no chance to have any input into the evolution of the design. The specific facts of the competition are one issue, but just as important is who is on the jury. Is the majority of members made up of architects, in which case you will certainly get one kind of result, or is it of lay experts, in which you will get quite another. Or is the final decision left to the political will of a Chirac or a Pompidou, as it was in the cases of the French national library, and the Grande Arche.

The competition can be a way to create a sense of an event around the building in question. Such is the determination of the architect to get a job at any cost that there is a conditioned reflex. They can't help themselves but to enter projects that are manifestly misconceived, which have no chance of actually being realized, or are staged simply to feed the vain fantasies of the promoter. In this category one could place the grand mosque of Sadaam Hussein, as well as the Peak Club competition in Hong Kong. The former would very likely have had a seriously deleterious effect on the prospects of its likely winners, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, but fortunately for their reputations, Hussein chose to invade Iran rather than build it.

Zaha Hadid did not get to build the Peak Club either, but it did give her the launch pad she needed to set out on her journey to international attention. And it also marked a watershed in her architectural thinking. At the start of the 1980s, her defiance of gravity, and her rediscovery of the Constructivists was eventually to trigger a new architectural language.

It is the chance a competition offers of doing something equally visible, that still prompts so many young architects to pour so much time and energy into embarking on competitions. But it can be a deeply frustrating process. The dichotomy is always between the search for fresh talent that depends on making competitions open to any qualified architect, and the need to deal with uncertainty by working with architects who are known quantities.

The Cardiff Bay Opera House competition in 1993 tried, in what seemed at the time like an intelligent way, to have it both ways. It had a two stage process, with the first stage being entirely open. The organizers proposed to select four architects to take part in a second stage in which they would be paid to produce a more elaborate response to the brief, in competition with four other architects who had already been invited to take part, including Norman Foster and Raphael Moneo. These were the kind of established names who would be unlikely to submit themselves into the uncertainties of an open competition. (1951) It meant in theory that Cardiff could be secure that whatever the uncertainties thrown up by the open anonymous stage, the city would have the question of its opera house considered by four of the greatest architectural minds in the world. The Opera's managers could be secure that there would be something impressive to choose from. And at first it all seemed so promising. But the competition ended up in making almost everybody look bad. Especially Cardiff, which dissolved in bitterness and acrimony when the winner was announced as Zaha Hadid. One faction in the city were outraged by her selection, and

did all they could to have her replaced. When they did not succeed, they tried to stop the commission altogether. Hadid's project was abandoned.

The nature of the jury process is also critical to the outcome, with how many jurors there are and who they are as the most significant factors. A jury with a majority of architects, or even one exclusively made up of them, is an arrangement that will produce a Sydney Opera House, or a Pompidou Center. This could be seen as favoring architect's architecture. Competitions can go wrong when the promoter is not entirely clear about what they are looking for. A clear brief is an essential first step. And it is equally important that the promoter have an understanding of how to achieve the project, rather than counting on the hope that an architectural model from a winning architect will be enough to unlock funds.

The Royal Institute of British Architects, which has had a significant role as a competition organizer, offers a variety of what it calls tried and tested competitive processes to potential patrons. But it suggests that, "often a hybrid competition is seen as the most advantageous solution." The RIBA draws a distinction between an Open Design Competition "that offers the widest possible variety of design solutions from which to choose, and the chance that the competition may 'discover' a new architectural talent or an established architectural practice not renowned for designing buildings of a particular type." But the RIBA warns that, "clients should note that assessing a large number of designs is very time consuming and jury panels must be prepared to put in the

necessary time that is needed to ensure that all submissions are given due consideration. Since it is untested, the personal relationship between the client and architect may not prove to be fruitful and resources and experience of the design team might not be sufficient to deliver the design. Most clients choose to introduce a second stage into the competition process, allowing designs formulated in the first stage to be developed to a more detailed level in the second stage. Anonymity may be lifted, enabling architects proceeding to this second phase to establish preliminary working relationships with the client."

To ask a group of judges to take a realistic look at the potential of as many as 300 entries, attracted by some of the most high profile competitions, would take a week rather than the day or two that are usually allocated. To get it right demands an investment of time and money. It needs a well-formulated brief that helps to take the guesswork out of the picture. It needs a technical support system to analyze the work for advice on feasibility and cost, especially where the building under consideration is technically demanding, such as a concert hall. In contrast to an open competition, the RIBA suggests that an Invited Competition "allows a client to choose the architects or design teams who will take part in the competitive process. There are many advantages and reasons for selecting this method of competition. The client is assured that those invited to take part in the competition all have the right balance of experience, expertise, proven design flair and the personal chemistry needed to work with the client body. Many clients choose to precede the

Invited Competition with an open trawl of interest, thus giving the client a wide range of practices from which to choose. Those selected for the competition would each be paid an equal level of honoraria commensurate with the amount of design detail requested. This provides a guarantee that practices will commit considerable time and effort to the project. Many clients select a Hybrid Solution, choosing to combine the Design Competition (either Open or Invited) with the Competitive Interview process. This proves particularly successful with projects of a complex and sensitive nature. By introducing an interview element into the design process, the client is able to determine the likely working relationship with the competing design teams. Similarly it enables the client to see how the design team is organized. This is particularly important in cases where architects have teamed up with a consultant with whom they have not worked before, or if the teams' consultants are located at different ends of the country or indeed in some cases, in different countries."

The RIBA warns that, "Architects spend a considerable amount of time and money on competition entries, and the need for transparency and accountability is crucial. In Britain the involvement of the RIBA in the competition process endorses the client's strong commitment to fairness, and will give confidence to competitors. A competition not managed by an independent third party may deter many architects from participating. All competitions depend for their success on well-written briefs, clear rules, efficient organization and fair conduct. A fully audited competition is imperative not only in the eyes of clients and

architects, but in other interested parties such as local businesses, planning authorities, funding bodies, and the general public.

"Inadequacies in the brief are one of the commonest reasons why competitions fail, and it is vital that it is drafted by a competent professional. Similarly the competition rules must be carefully and unambiguously phrased." ¹⁶ This sensible and sober advice offered by the RIBA, hardly addresses the imperial competition of the type favored by the French. Francois Mitterrand, the most monumentalizing president of modern times wanted some kind of landmark to define the extension of the great urban axis that connects the Louvre with the Arc de Triomphe, all the way out to La Defense. An open competition was staged to meet the challenge, and a winning design selected by a jury of architects.

Ultimately however it was Mitterrand himself who made the choice, having gone to the extent of arranging for the roads around La Defense to be closed one sweltering August weekend to allow the biggest crane in France to winch a mock-up into place. In a positively Stalinist gesture the president wanted to see for himself the impact it would have on the view of Paris from the gardens of the Elysee palace. And he made the final decision for the French National Library himself too.

But in a system which respects the sanctity of the competitive approach, there are great advantages for the architect. In the case of Porto's Casa da Musica, a concert hall commission won by Rem Koolhaas, it was completed six years late, in the face of a constant turn-

over of committees, mayors and directors, mainly because of the respect the Portuguese pay to the competition idea. Once a design has been selected there is a sense of obligation to see it through.

I have personal experience of two different procurement processes for architectural design in the run up to the 2012 Olympic Games. I was involved with a cast of thousands in helping the New York team select an architect or architects, to work on preparatory thinking for the shape that the New York Olympic Village might, or might not take, and for the Olympic Swimming Pool for London also for the 2012 games. It would be tempting, but probably inaccurate to assume that the differences between the two processes might have had something to do with the ultimate decision by the International Olympics Commission to award the games to London, rather than New York. In New York I was part of a panel that included architects, planners, athletes and urbanists whose role was to offer advice about which architects the 2012 people might want to talk to about moving the project on. The selected names, winners would be far too strong a word, would go forward to talk some more with the 2012 people, and then, if the games did actually come to New York, then the architects would get the chance to talk to the developers who, as far as I see it, would get to take all the real decisions. The wonder is that any of us consented to invest any time in this conspicuous waste of effort. London on the other hand combined a brisk initial cull from a request for submission of credentials, with a generously funded paid submission from six selected architects, and a

commitment to use the winning designer to build a pool of some kind whether the Olympics came to London or not. The result is Zaha Hadid's first major British commission.¹⁷

Part of the issue is the division of the jury that makes the selection, from those who will fund, build and operate the result. There is a perception that architect-dominated juries will favor a certain kind of design in which architectural expression is given a privileged position above all else. There is little sense from the point of view of an architect in taking part in a competition in which there is no guarantee that the winning architect will also be awarded the commission to build the result. There is also a suggestion that competitions should seek to select architects, rather than specific designs. This is a formula presented as a means of reducing the burden on competitions.

But it is a distinction that is easier to suggest, than it is to define. Even the most experienced of juries is going to want something more concrete than words to help them make up their minds between a selection of architects whose work they may know. They will want to get some sense of how their thinking would address the problem at hand. And from that it's a short distance to deciding on the basis of the plans that are out in front of them, even if there is no intention to build exactly what is suggested. Most clients who have no direct experience of architectural design find it very hard to be anything but literal about an architectural process. They want to see them design something concrete, and they take diagrams entirely at face value.

Equally, it is vital that the competition rules allow the judges to make their decision on the right grounds. Richard Rogers has publicly voiced his unhappiness with the Italian competition system for example. What was introduced as a means of addressing the pervasive system of corruption that has notoriously overtaken the country's construction programs since the 1960s, has turned into a bureaucratic straightjacket that has done little to raise the quality of contemporary Italian architecture. Rogers was on the jury for a competition to design a large new public library in Northern Italy, and found that the organizers insisted on sticking to the letter of the legislation that has made an element of competition compulsory in allocating public contracts, rather than its spirit. The freedom of jurors to take a balanced, measured view in their decision making has been compromised. Juries are forced to work to a point scoring system, allocating only a portion of their votes to design quality, or innovation, or urban context, and making them credit office size, the number of computers owned by the studio, staff qualifications and other purely technical issues. The result, according to Rogers, was that in the competition he took part in, complex questions of judgment were reduced to a mechanical process, leading to the selection of a design that none of the jury would have put as their first choice.¹⁸

A successful competition system is one that forms a natural part of a national or civic culture. It allows for the competition to become a norm, used in a variety of different ways, in order to cut down on wasted effort, to identify new talent, and nurture it. This is how

cities such as Frankfurt have used their civic budget to allocate public buildings under their control such as nursery schools, to competition winners. It is how Barcelona set about its two decade long process of transformation in the post-Franco years. And in Britain, the invited competition is one of the means that has been used to encourage developers to look for more imaginative solutions to archi-

tectural problems by working outside the usual limits of what might be termed commercial architecture. It is not a panacea by itself, but it is, when used in the right way, a powerful tool to build better cities.¹⁸ Richard Rogers's remarks about Italian architectural competitions are taken from an article he wrote for *Domus Magazine* 2001.

Notes

1. Capital competition guidelines by Thomas Johnson and Thomas Jefferson; *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia) March 24 1792: Newspaper Serial and Government Publications Division Library of Congress.

2. *Architecture of Democracy*. Sudjic, Deyan and Jones, Helen. Laurence King London 2000.

3. Papers of Sir Charles Barry, Parliamentary Archive, London.

4. *The Life and Work of John Nash, Architect*. Summerson, John. MIT Press, 1981

5. *Design by Competition: Making Competition Work*. Nasar, Jack L. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge England 1999.

6. For U2 competition in Dublin, and the lost identity of the winning architect, see *Irish Times*, September 04, 2003.

7. For two views of Sydney opera house, see *Great Planning Disasters*. Hall, Peter. University of California Press 1982.

8. *The Saga of Sydney Opera House*. Peter Murray, Spon Press 2003

9. For an account of the evolution of Foster's design, see "Rebuilding the Reichstag." Foster, Norman. *Overlook*, 2000.

10. For Caltrava's view of Foster's design, see his interview in *El Pais* of 1999.

11. For the Bastille Opera House affair, and the Grand Arche see *Le Paris de Francois Mitterrand; Histoire des Grands Projets Architectaux*. Chaslin, Francois. Gallimard, 1985.

12. Koolhaas wins Hague City Hall, Meier commissioned, see: Nesmith, *Architecture*, June 1987, pp. 15.

13. Ground Zero see : Frank Gehry in *New York Times Magazine*. January 5, 2005.

14. John Pawson's remarks from *El Croquis Madrid*, January 2006.

15. The account of the CCTV competition in Beijing is from a conversation with Charles Jencks with the author, reproduced in part in Sudjic, Deyan, *The Edifice Complex*, Penguin, 2005.

16. RIBA Guidance Notes for Clients.

17. Crickhowell, Nicholas. *Opera House Lottery: Zaha Hadid and the Cardiff Bay Project*. University of Wales Press, 1997.

18. Richard Rogers's remarks about Italian architectural competitions are taken from an article he wrote for *Domus Magazine*, 2001.