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# Competing to Learn: The Berkeley Prize and the Social Art of Architecture

Raymond Lifchez and Benjamin Clavan

*Go about your city and investigate for yourself the situation of the displaced and those who assist them. Based on what you find, what are your recommendations for bettering the situations of those displaced persons that you believe could be helped? Write about your discoveries in the form of a persuasive article for an influential community newspaper.*

The above challenge provided the basis for the 2004 International Berkeley Prize for Undergraduate Design Excellence. Since its founding in 1996, the prize has encouraged undergraduate architecture students to write about issues central to the understanding of the social art of architecture and the social role of the architect in today's world.

What is that role? What should it be? By asking students to grapple with just such problems, the Prize brings to the forefront of students' thinking the reality that architecture is a social art.

In 2004, when it chose the issue of shelter for displaced and disenfranchised persons, the prize committee knew it would be raising a host of issues, some of which are often seen as foreign to architecture. Even among academics and practicing professionals there is little consensus as to how to discuss, let alone attack, design issues related to individuals who have never constituted the traditional notion of a "client group." Nevertheless, the quality of student essays reflects a commitment to addressing and attempting to answer these questions.

Here is how one student describes his efforts to provide answers in the context of the homeless in a major American city:

The past few weeks have been unusually warm. Tonight, however, the temperature has dropped thirty degrees and a nor'easterly wind whips across the lake, cutting its way through the permeable city. Although I am new in town and only a visitor, I have found a place to escape from the confinement of my current living conditions. It is a popular spot. A well-lit corridor, formed by an arcade of massive stone columns four feet in length, provides protection from the busy street while suppressing the violent wind. Elevated above the sidewalk plane atop a six-inch stoop, a man is resting his worn body, and lays shielded by the deep jambs of an entranceway clad in marble.

Dude, you need some gear?

Huh? What? Okay I'm up!

Sorry man. Please don't get up. I didn't

mean to wake you.

Oh, I thought you was the cops. Glad to see you ain't.

No, I'm no cop.

Although he was on his feet quickly, he fumbles while folding his newspaper mattresses into a plastic Marshall Fields bag. Another bag, already containing paper, had previously served as his pillow.

Lay back down, and I'll leave you alone.

No I need to get up.

Well then, I'm John. What's your name?

I'm Steve, nice to meet you John.

Steve's grip is rough and scratchy, the agony in his life is apparent in his handshake.

Where you from? Not around here, huh?

I'm from Virginia. How about you?

Right here in Chicago, never been nowhere else.

You need some gear! Aren't you cold?

Nah, John. It's not cold yet.

Steve, wearing a white sweatshirt, brown pants and brown boots, has a new Miami Hurricanes cap lying loosely on his head. He stands there scratching his scraggly beard with one hand, and rubbing his squinted eyes with the other. Excluding the hat, I am dressed similarly, and also have a scruffy appearance. The only difference is that while the cold makes my teeth chatter, Steve is accustomed to the weather and is unscathed by the chilling conditions.

Where are you heading John?

Well I thought I'd follow you around for a while. Is that okay?

(Laughingly) Yeah I'll give you a tour. Let me put this in here.

Why are you throwing your bag in the trash? Don't you need that stuff?

Ah don't worry about it. They don't pick up 'till eight-thirty. What time is it anyway?

I don't wear a watch, but I think it's around three.

Good, I can't carry these bags all the time. I got a bad shoulder. I'll put this other one behind this dumpster and get it later... .

The essay goes on to describe an eye-opening encounter. In the role of a student of hardscabble urban life, John spends the rest of the early morning with the homeless

man, who, as in an eighteenth-century utopian novel, acts as his guide. The man points out features of the city that are safe: places to stay warm (using exhaust steam from restaurant kitchens) or to sleep unnoticed by either the police or those who would prey on the homeless; places to find food and use a restroom.

The essay concludes by arguing for the kinds of public amenities that were once commonplace in the American city—the public bathhouse, the flophouse, the soup kitchen:

Although it may take several generations before mankind [sic] can trust each other without fear, the suggestions I make for alternative public amenities are credible and realistic approaches to enhancing the quality and future of urban settings.

“Let’s Have Dinner”

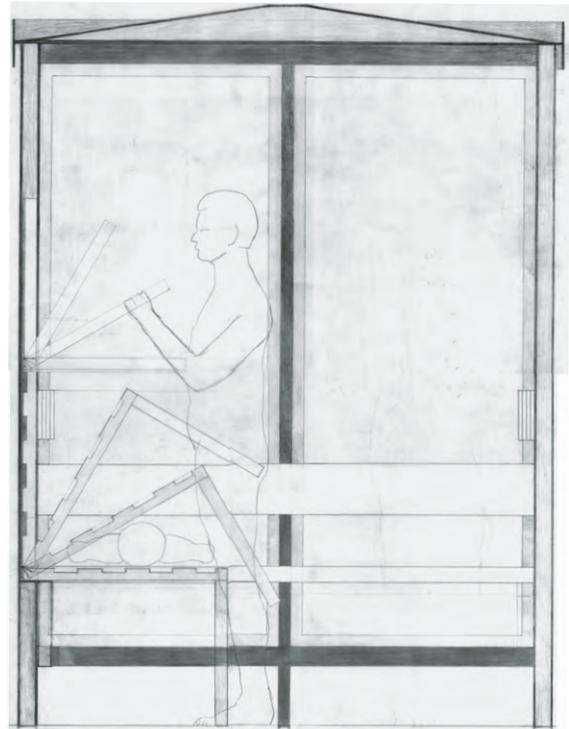
John Rea, Virginia Polytechnic Institute  
USA (Third Prize)

### Encouraging Idealism

The Berkeley Prize is the centerpiece of an endowment established in 1996 in the Department of Architecture at the College of Environmental Design at the University of California, Berkeley. Its activities are overseen by a group of interested academics and professionals who form a loosely knit Berkeley Prize Committee. Each year this group formulates a question, posted online, that asks students to put their thoughts and experiences with regard to an important social issue into words and selects a jury to review entries. In 2004 the prize jury included Marco Casagrande, architect and environmental artist, Finland; Beth Gali, urban planner and landscape architect, Spain; Peter Prangnell, architect, critic, and author, Canada; and Minja Yang, Culture Sector, UNESCO, France.

In past years, the prize questions have asked students to think about such issues as the equitable use of public places; the appropriateness of institutional care for the elderly; the street as mediator between public and private selves; the search for lasting values in architecture; and the exploration of meaning in social architecture. All of these topics have been presented in ways that provoke consideration of the role architects may play in identifying and redressing complex social issues.

Proposal for transforming the bus shelters of Ames, Iowa, into overnight sleeping accommodations for the homeless. Drawing by Angela Nkya, 2004 Berkeley Prize winner.



In response and encouragingly, there is throughout the submitted essays an implicit idealism about the possibilities of an architecture that addresses social ills through good design. The 2004 prize cycle was no exception: When the general public is questioned about the problem of homelessness in their community, the answers are always the same. “They chose this lifestyle” or “if they wanted to change they would.” As we wait for someone else to initiate a solution, the number of people on the street grows steadily. Sure, we feel compassion when the nostalgia of the holiday’s set in, or on those cold winter nights when the thermometer plummets below freezing and we can’t imagine how anyone will survive on the street. Where is our concern through the remainder of the year as we hurry along ignoring the voices asking for spare change or even crossing the road so we won’t have to deal with this nuisance?

We need a general reawakening of common sense and empathy towards our fellow citizen. Schools can start the process by integrating a social conscience into the education system. Young architects need to learn financial and social accountability when developing design concepts. To be told this isn’t important now

reinforces the notion we are designing only for those with power and money. Integrating all levels of income needs to play an important role in the design education of an architect.

“Productive Lives: Eradicating the Barriers”  
Sandra Thomson, Dalhousie University  
Canada (Honorable Mention)

### Alternatives to the “Shelter”

As in previous years, in 2004 students were not only asked to think about the chosen topic but to propose solutions. This is where the responses often become most ingenious. In the 2004 competition most entrants find fault with the conventional solution of the “shelter,” as they believed it to be conceived. Essentially, they argued that, after a brief reconnaissance, many displaced people find shelters stigmatizing and/or dangerous, and prefer the street.

As an alternative, some students argue for respecting what the homeless do for themselves to solve their problems. Others argue for this respect, but also, simultaneously, for resources from the outside to augment their efforts.

In essays from Singapore and Austria two students discuss racism as a factor underlying their cities’ reluctance to effectively assist outsiders. In one case, people considered different were seen as an urban blemish; in the other, it was people of color. For example:

Graz is the cultural capital of Europe 2003 and officially the city of human rights. However, in traditionally conservative environment the “everyday racism” is supported by already described mechanisms. The politics of “city-cleaning” is manifested by removals of “unrepresentative” persons from public squares.... [But] due to the fact that marginal groups are top subject of increasingly popular cultural studies, there is a stimulus from certain academic circles that Graz should build its identity exactly on multiculturalism which would make it more interesting destination for cultural tourists.

As the starting point for integrating the “other” into the population, this author proposes turning the open spaces surrounding nineteenth-century tenements into points of interest for tourists. In any case, he argues, here was a housing stock and open space that needed to be improved.

Spaces open for staging the “authentic” handicraft services or music and cooking shows would satisfy the tourists’ need to discover and reconstruct the historic past(s) and social identities with the needed doses of amusement. The parks could be connected to each other through the passages in the building wings, forming the network of parks spreading through the structures of existing buildings.

“Changing Architecture”  
Snezana Tubic, Technische  
Universität, Graz, Austria

A student at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, Paul Akpokodje, suggests a solution of social policy. He writes that in his city refugees are relegated to camps outside the city and are allowed to come in only for services, such as medical care and schools. His solution is that these services be established within the camps and become the nucleus from which the refugees themselves could begin to take control of the resources necessary for social and physical health — and permanence.

Other entrants suggest solutions requiring reconsideration of how existing buildings are used, as in these three proposals:

The central business district of Tel-Aviv is a hybrid version of financial services and governmental offices along with the industrial manufacturing zones, bordering the poor neighborhoods. Almost two-thirds of this district is based on a cycle of day life/night life. During work hours, the financial working classes occupy the offices, the traffic is booming and the workshops are busy. Main traffic roads are jammed with cars and buses, next to public pedestrian sidewalks shaded by tall curtain-wall buildings.

At night, the offices are empty and the wide parking lots are vacant — the only facilities open are notorious members-only clubs and old wedding halls.... These office buildings can better the conditions of the homeless.... Most of these office buildings sit on a multilevel platform. The city can let the corporations convert or add spaces on this platform, to be utilized as public shelters for the homeless. The facade will be an advertising zone that will not only be

for commercial uses, but can also send a clear visible statement to the community....

Establishing spaces for the displaced in the interstitial areas of buildings in a legalized way can not only better the conditions for the homeless, but the corporation's public image as well. With the increase of the public's social awareness, a lot of money is invested in advertising aimed at image improvement. Recently, a rising number of Israeli conglomerates have made efforts to sponsor and donate to voluntary campaigns, leading to media coverage that promotes their community-oriented image in the eyes of the public.

“The Right Path”  
Barak Levy, Technion  
Haifa, Israel (Second Prize)

An American student furthers this idea by recommending that benches in conventional bus shelters be made in a way that would accommodate sleeping:

Instead of creating a new building, which raises the questions of where it is to be located and who will fund its construction, we can simply use the existing elements such as bus shelters and make them adaptable for sleeping at certain hours. The bus shelters in Ames are used during the day and remain unused after midnight. We could design them in such a way that they can be transformed to a sleeping compartment from midnight to 6 AM. Buildings such as transit bus depots, which Ames does not have at the moment, can serve dual functions by providing services such as public bathrooms, telephones and lockers to both the travelers and the homeless.

“At Home in the City”  
Angela Nkya, Iowa State University  
USA (First Prize)

Another American student recommends that unused warehouses be converted into hydroponic gardens where the homeless would find community through productive work and self-esteem — and reasonably, a greater wherewithal to take on the other problems of homelessness themselves. His is an architectural solution for social ame-

lioration in the spirit of social engineering, a kind of phalansterie, conceived of by a contemporary Charles Fourier:

Only when the homeless have a sense of power and control over their fate will they be accepted by society. Society must not only want to help the homeless, but must also need the homeless. So the question is, how do we give the homeless a sense of value for themselves while also feeling value from society? Integrating farms into the city may present the opportunity for homeless to provide for themselves and society.... Urban farms will be vertical. They will be a new type of multilevel building providing agriculture within the city. This form of farming can be brought to the city through technology and architecture. We possess the capacity to create urban farms... urban farms to be run by the homeless....

Once the buildings are ready for farming, a group of homeless can begin work under support and supervision of knowledgeable trainers. It is within the power of the selected soon-to-be farmers to make the urban farms successful. If individuals are not successful, the city will admit other willing homeless to the program, allowing others the opportunity. Urban farms, in a sense, would wake people up saying “hey, here is a way out, it is now up to you to succeed.

“Homeless Integration into Society  
through Urban Farms”  
Eric Vergne, Savannah College of  
Art and Design, USA

### **Promoting Communication and Thought**

As architects, and students of architecture, we should want to know if and how our professional skills can be of use to local governments, institutions, private groups, and individuals in meeting specific social needs — such as those posed by disenfranchised populations studied by entrants in the 2004 prize competition. To find out, we must first understand the issues directly, “on the ground.” Second, we must recognize that solutions to these problems are, by definition, interdisciplinary. Both ideas are an integral part of how students are asked to research and respond to the prize questions.

By stressing essay writing, the prize deliberately forces students into unfamiliar territory where they must grapple

with a form of communication not normally stressed in architecture education. Architects generally feel most comfortable communicating by way of drawn or modeled images of one sort or another. But they must also be able to communicate their research findings and design proposals effectively in verbal and written form to the public, to clients, and to colleagues.

The Berkeley Prize asks students to create images with words, much like they might create images with drawings in the design studio. When they succeed in describing their ideas in words, they can not help but realize that, as future professionals, they have begun to train themselves in another way to advocate their thoughts to a general population (and, indeed, many clients) that do not understand abstract drawings or even ordinary plans. Similarly, as a result of this process, it is hoped that students might also begin to realize that it is actually through language that the images of intended building forms and the context in which they are embedded are conceived.

At its heart, the Berkeley Prize seeks to challenge undergraduate students to use language to engage with and communicate ideas which are typically more sophisticated than those they might project through hand drawings or conjure up on their computers. Through essay writing the Berkeley Prize attempts to educate architects-in-training that the smallest act of building has global implications: that design can and does play a major role in the social, cultural and psychological life of both the individual and society.

Some students respond instinctively to this lesson:

“You employ stone, wood and concrete, and with these materials you build house and places. That is construction. But suddenly you touch my heart, you do me good, I am happy and I say: “This is beautiful. That is Architecture.” [Le Corbusier] This is the kind of home the poor, homeless and refugees should be given. The home that says, “They too are cared.”

“A Voice of Poverty”

Kamana Dhakhwa, Institute of Engineering  
Nepal

In a similar vein, but on another note altogether, the previously quoted Canadian student cited negative attitudes toward the homeless as one reason why aid to them is often slow and inadequate:

We live in a cynical world; where we should be building bridges we are instead proposing fences. Rehashing the same solutions over and over again, we have settled into the pattern of treating the symptom without diagnosing the cause. Someone needs to step in and break the cyclical cycle of non-productivity and bring this pattern of repetition to an end. By focusing on the lack of affordable housing in the downtown core, Architects and Planners have the opportunity to play a leading role in recreating the fabric of the city. Egos and attitudes need to be put aside as we work with other professional’s educating each other on the reality of the street. Only by breaking through the preconceived notions on who the displaced are and what battles they face will we create a level playing field for those fighting for survival in today’s society.

“Productive Lives: Eradicating the Barriers”

Sandra Thomson

### Engagement as a Goal

The success of the Berkeley Prize as a vehicle to encourage the study of social architecture will not ultimately be judged by the level or quality of the rhetoric of the competitors—although fine writing is a prize in itself. It will be successful because it has been able to encourage writing as a means by which awareness of social issues is explored and magnified. It will be successful because it demonstrates the potential for architects to become proponents of better policies and designs through words as well as images.

The emphasis on encouraging students to view the public as their audience and to learn new ways to communicate with them has one final practical benefit. By learning to talk to the public, competitors should also discover that they can be persuasive advocates of social architecture among those for whom such advocacy is most important: those who use architecture, rather than those who make it.

### Note

The full text of all quoted responses can be read at <http://www.berkeleyprize.org/2004/stage2.cfm>.

# The Berkeley Prize Travel Fellowship



*A ragged busker is taking refuge in one of many Barcelonian vestibules. He begins singing “no woman, no cry.” A comrade joins him merrily grating a tree branch (with) a ribbed plastic tube in time to the worn, but melodious guitar. Gradually, passers-by are drawn into the space by the energy of the impromptu performance. Suddenly, this ordinarily neglected space is transformed by the creative initiative of two young men trying to scrape together enough money for a meal ticket and a place to sleep. In the process, an unowned [sic] space of no distinct character becomes temporary stage, dance floor and amphitheater.*

— Adriano Pupilli, University of Sydney  
(Travel Fellowship Proposal)

Beginning in 2004, finalists for the Berkeley Prize essay competition were also given the opportunity to complete for a two-week travel fellowship. The 2004 Berkeley Prize Travel Fellowship winner, Adriano Pupilli, proposed to “explore the issues facing Barcelona’s displaced youth and the nature of the self-help architectural solutions they

developed.” In particular, he was interested in “the adaptation of borrowed/ recycled space and materials and their role in housing the displaced, [specifically] the integration, interaction and role of these social housing alternatives within the surrounding urban fabric.”

No one on the Berkeley Prize committee was under the illusion that any one person could achieve these ends in two weeks in a foreign country. Pupilli, however, did come well-prepared: three months living and working with “informal” settlers on the fringe of Manila (by the base of a large mountain of continually combusting rubbish); the development of a self-construct kit of paper components that assemble to create a low-cost and fully recyclable paper house — built on the steps of the Sydney Opera House in the fall of 2004; and work with Australia’s Housing for Health.

What did he bring back from Barcelona? He walked the streets of Barcelona, made friends with the homeless, and catalogued how they adapted borrowed/recycled space and materials. He also met with represen-

tatives of *Architectos Sin Fronteras* (Architects Without Borders, who, among other activities, advocate for young squatters), visited several government housing projects, researched government housing in the National Library, and participated in the events of Forum Barcelona.

In some ways, it is probably not ultimately important what a young architecture student proposes to study as a traveling fellow. There is a case to be made that you can not actually study architecture until you are in your thirties or forties, since it takes that long to begin to understand all of the intricacies of the design and building process. What you can do is develop an eye for determining what is important about the way people live and the way the buildings they build support, or do not support, those ways of life. You can, in other words, study yourself.

Pupilli puts his own spin on it:

*Pursuing interests in an architecture that seeks to respond to social and ethical directives has not always been an easy or clear path to follow. To students around the world, where local universities and governments may not support such an approach, [institutions] such as the Berkeley Prize provide invaluable direction and support to those interested in pursuing a field of architecture that is often overshadowed by more mainstream course objectives.... It would be difficult to deny that shelter of some form is a necessity for all on this planet. To those responsible for its development and evolution, a social understanding is fundamental.*

What better way to describe the goals, and successes, of the Berkeley Prize?

Barcelona street life. Photo by Adriano Pupilli, Berkeley Prize Travel Fellowship winner.

# The Berkeley Prize: Questions, 1999-2005

**2005**

What makes a place truly public? Go out into a community that you know well and find an exceptional, built example of one such place. In most likelihood, among other attributes, this place will embody the traditions of local culture and be a reflection of the world at large. Describe this place in a way that makes it a compelling demonstration of how other places might remain similarly vital to their own communities. Be both evocative and specific in your tribute to this place.

**2004**

Go about your city and investigate for yourself the situation of the displaced and those who assist them. Based on what you find, what are your recommendations for bettering the situations of those displaced persons that you believe could be helped? Write about your discoveries in the form of a persuasive article for an influential community newspaper.

**2003**

When architects strive to create lasting monuments, some become part of the significant cultural heritage of our age. These successes seem to embody the most socially important values of a city, region, country, or even the world. Other attempts are only the reflection of the vanity of the designer or client and pass into oblivion. Worse, they become a permanent blight on the environment. As an architect, specifically, how can your work simultaneously embody the social values of one place, a particular culture, and universal human concerns?

**2002**

Throughout history, the Street has served as a mediator between our



public and private lives. The photographs below are vivid examples of how this occurs. With rapid change occurring today in every culture, the traditional social value of the street is also undergoing change and in many instances is losing this human element. As an architect, how do you address this issue?

**2001**

Considering what has been, and contemplating what might be, what principles and objectives should guide architects committed to the concept that Architecture is a Social Art?

**2000**

Architecture as a social art: What role can architecture play as a socially responsive endeavor in the future? Discuss in light of your examination of architectural history, theory, and your studio design experience.

**1999**

The Architect Meets The Nursing Home: Architects question the

suitability of the generic American Nursing Home as a humane environment for the Frail Elderly and propose innovative design ideas. Does the "Nursing Home," as an architectural vehicle for the Long Term Care of the Elderly, work well as a humane environment? If so, what are its best and worst features? The architect's answers to this question are informed by reading critical literature and by direct experience of at least two nursing homes of the architect's choice.

Barcelona street life. Photo by Adriano Pupilli, Berkeley Prize Travel Fellowship winner.

## The Berkeley Prize: How it Works

Each year, the Berkeley Prize Committee poses a question on its website, [www.berkeleyprize.org](http://www.berkeleyprize.org). Students enrolled in any undergraduate architecture program throughout the world are invited to submit a 500-word essay proposal responding to the question. From this pool of essays, approximately 25 are selected by the prize committee as particularly promising. These semifinalists are then asked to submit a 2,500-word essay expanding on their proposals. A group of readers, composed of committee members and invited colleagues, selects five to eight of the best essays and sends these finalists on to a jury of international academics and architects to select the winners. The prize is announced, papers submitted, and reader and jury-reviewed all online. The most recent winner was awarded \$3,500 from a \$5,000 prize pool.

During the past six years, hundreds of students have submitted proposals and essays, representing dozens of schools of architecture from nearly forty countries. In recognition of these efforts, the prize was the recipient of the 2002 American Institute of Architects' Education Honor Award. The Berkeley Prize has also garnered international acclaim, not the least reason for which is its complete embracing of digital technology. In partial recognition of this outreach, the 2003 Berkeley Prize competition was named a special event of "World Heritage in the Digital Age," a virtual congress helping to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention.

Organized by the UNESCO World Heritage Center, the virtual congress was one of a series of events scheduled to highlight the far-reaching goals of the World Heritage Convention to "maintain, increase, and diffuse knowledge, by assuring



the conservation and protection of the world's heritage." (For further information on the virtual congress, visit [www.virtualworldheritage.org](http://www.virtualworldheritage.org).)

The 2004 prize competition attracted 97 entries from students representing 29 countries and 43 undergraduate architecture programs on six continents. Twelve of these entries were collaborative efforts.

The 2004 competition also established the Berkeley Prize Travel Fellowship. This new prize recognizes the vital role that exposure to other cultures and environments plays in helping to demonstrate the reality and importance of the social art of architecture. All finalists for the essay competition are invited to submit proposals demonstrating how they would use a two-week, expenses-paid, trip to an architecturally-significant destination selected by the prize committee.

The 2004 Berkeley Prize honored its continuing association with UNESCO's World Heritage Center by enabling the travel fellowship winner to visit Barcelona for two

weeks and attend Forum Barcelona 2004, a six month-long, city-wide, international cultural event partially sponsored by UNESCO (<http://www.barcelona2004.org/eng/>). The travel fellowship was also seen as potentially enabling the student to take part in the international conference, "Arquitectura 3000: the Architecture of Indifference", sponsored by Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura de Barcelona at the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya in Barcelona in the summer of 2004 (<http://www.ckk.chalmers.se/vr/arquitectura3000/>).

Barcelona street life. Photo by Adriano Pupilli, Berkeley Prize Travel Fellowship winner.