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Competition and Architectural Excellence

Jacques Cabanier

During the past 15 years, France has become one of the richest and most active countries in the field of contemporary architecture. Having architects compete with one another in architectural competitions has undoubtedly been one of the main instruments used to revive architectural quality.

France is the only country in Europe with regulations making competitions a prerequisite for the allocation of publically-funded construction projects exceeding a certain cost. The procedure obliges the client to reimburse the cost of studies made by the teams selected, a fact that leads them to organize limited competitions in order to reduce the number of participants.

For some 10 years, the practice of holding competitions has spread and now concerns not only all public-sector projects but also certain city planning, civil engineering and even private construction projects. Competitions have become fashionable — more than 1,000 are organised a year, for the smallest municipality to the largest government agency. They account for most of the work that many professional designers have.

The rules governing the organization of competitions are set forth by a national agency, the Interministerial Mission for the Quality of Public Construction. The agency has recognized a number of principles that are essential to ensuring quality in architectural design:

- Pre-approved lists of architects and construction models have been suppressed.
- The ultimate responsibility for a project must be in the hands of the client, whose authority must be strengthened and whose involvement in the process must be total.
- Preliminary programming studies, developed with the participation of users, are fundamentally important.
- The global cost of construction and maintenance objectives must be considered in building design.

All competitions begin with the definition of a program based on preliminary studies. This program is a document used as a basis for discussion and as a reference for all participants. The preliminary studies, carried out with the participation of the users, include a period of reflection on the institution, on the organization of work and on the services to be provided to users.

Numerous questions are posed. What is the function of the building and what activities does it involve? What site should be selected and how should the building fit into it? What symbolic image should be created? These questions can be used to determine the demand, evaluate the needs and define the objectives of the project.

What are the advantages and disad-
vantages of this procedure? First, a
competition offers a choice between
several projects, not between several
architects. A competition balances the
powers of the client, who has to respect
the winning project, and those of the
architect, who cannot impose his or
her project because it must first be
selected by the jury. It gives new design-
ners a better chance, opening up com-
misions to young and even foreign
candidates. And it stimulates creativity,
contributing actively to the architec-
tural debate of our time.

This procedure does have its disad-
vantages. It precludes any contact
between the client and the designer
until the jury has made its choice. It is
exhausting for the profession and
results in a certain waste of creativity.
(That is why reimbursement of candi-
dates who are not selected must be
provided for in every competition.)

The competition process certifies
the integrity of the winning project,
one of the best guarantees of architec-
tural quality. Once the choice is made,
the project is protected; the concept
cannot be questioned. This situation is
very different from that of a direct con-
tract, in which the employer is free to
accept or refuse the architect’s propos-
al, or to ask for modifications to bring
it in line with what is expected.

Although the completed building
will comply with the original concept,
its design may have been changed and
improved. The limited level of elabora-
tion demanded in the competition
allows the project to evolve. A compe-
tition based on sketches offers
immense flexibility to adapt. It is an
open proposal that can be enriched by
dialogue with the client during
the phases following the decision. Long
hours of cooperative effort between
the client, the users and the architect
will precede the project’s formaliza-
tion.

Competitions are now being orga-
nized for civil engineering structures,
such as highway viaducts in mountain-
ous regions or bridges over the Seine
River in Paris. They have concerned
urban design projects like the renov-
ation of public squares and parks
and urban renewal, as well as simple pro-
jects like water towers and cemeteries.
The systematic use of competitions
can offer a good chance of improving
architectural quality in public con-
struction projects. The objective of
these competitions must be to open up
commissions, and the consequence will
be a renaissance in architecture, an
emergence of new firms of architects
producing quality architecture, a
marginalizing of the extremely hermet-
ic landscape of star architects wielding
massive cultural power and a decrease
in the importance of large architecture
firms, the veritable industrialists of the
profession.

Dorlyns Lyndon: What is exciting about
the competition system was not the
result, not the fact that it was competi-
tion (although it is a good to allow new
stars to form), it’s the systematic effort
toward raising the understanding of
what architecture can be and what the
parts are that go together to make it
that way. It is the agency helping peo-
ples acquire real understanding of
the project, requiring the project really
be understood through a technical assess-
ment. A competition by itself isn’t any
better than some other system. But it is
better if it is part of a really carefully
constructed, continuous program of
learning, formulation and making pro-
grams.

Robert Blach: I think we have pretty
good evidence about the value of
design competitions. In France, there is
excellent work coming out of the
design competitions. The way they go
about it, sounds very complicated, but
the results seem to be good. I’d like to
propose that we build design competi-
tions into both federal and state pro-
cesses. Look at the scheme for public
art, one percent mandated for public
art in many federal, state and local pro-
jects. What if you put another one per-
cent for a competition?

Stanley Tigerman: I don’t think compe-
titions are necessarily the answer by
themselves, not in terms of architec-
ture, urban design or planning. They
often lead people to reinforce the con-
ventions.

Massimo Vignelli: Competitions aren’t
the same in every country: In France
competitions work very well because
the French love process and because of
the way French competitions are prepared,
the amount of homework they do is
incredible. In the U.S., competitions
don’t have the same conditions. Here,
a competition is more like an award. In
France, architects will work out the
prices of different proposals so the
judges can have those figures. This
would never happen in the U.S.