

Let us come straight to the point and say that producing quality architecture is not just the whim of a patron with deep pockets. Apart from being an act of goodwill to the public, an architecture that is ambitious and recognised as such generates an economic added value, rendering a building more desirable and competitive, while along the way enhancing the image not only of its occupant but also of its builder.

As no-one really disputes the importance of the role played by architectural competitions in raising quality levels, it is rather surprising to note that relatively few are held in proportion to the volumes constructed or in the course of construction in our region. So, where does the problem lie?

In the first place, people are no doubt intimidated by the fact that competitions are usually associated with grandiose iconic projects and tend to feel that their own development is just not important enough. In addition, the competition is often the instrument of choice of the public authorities, resulting in ponderous and highly formalised procedures in which the private sector does not feel at all at home.

There is every reason then to recall that competitions can perfectly well be organised for smaller projects and that they can also meet the requirements for flexibility and tight deadlines. This has repeatedly been our own experience and we find it admirable that the invitation to take part almost invariably meets with a positive response from architects of all kinds throughout the world.

There remains however a more subtle obstacle of a psychological nature to the holding of architectural competitions and this is the fear of losing control felt by the owner, who finds it a cosier arrangement to appoint his architect after a unilateral selection. Yet, this fear is misplaced in two respects. It ignores the fact, on the one hand, that the modalities of the competition can leave the owner with a considerable freedom of choice and, on the other, that the competition may throw up a pleasant surprise in the form of a proposal that far exceeds his initial expectations and objectives. To put it another way, once you start asking open-ended questions, you have a much better chance of getting interesting answers.



Thierry Barbier-Mueller
Chief Executive Officer of the SPG Group



The private architectural competition

By Richard Quincerot, urbaniste

"May the best man win!"

In many domains, the most effective way of achieving excellence is by providing a playing field on which talents can compete with each other. In architecture, this role is played by competitions in which architects are invited to pit their intelligence and creativity against each other to produce the best project for a given situation. There are two types of architectural competitions. The best known are the public competitions. With their high profile and the high stakes and expectations involved, they can give rise to polemics. Private competitions generate less glamour but are more certain to achieve their aim, which is confined to producing a high quality project.

The architectural competition applies the "free competition" model to the design of particular buildings or structures for which a high level of quality is sought. The procedure consists in establishing the conditions for a fair and loyal competition in which all that counts is the value of the projects themselves. The competition marks out a playing field in which the competitors and the jury have in mind one thing and one thing only, namely the development and selection of a "best project", the quality of which surpasses that of all of the others.

Many advantages

We are all familiar with the innumerable uses to which the abstract model of free competition is put in politics, economic and social affairs, sport, culture and so on. It is the "invisible hand" which relieves those in power of the burden of decision by separating out talents automatically, thus giving us the best of all possible worlds. Architectural competitions are a strict application of this model. Accordingly, they have found themselves attributed all sorts of advantages: the best way not only of producing a project but also of choosing an architect, revealing new talents, promoting architectural quality, organising the democratic debate, observing trends and the like. According to César Daly, the father of architectural journalism writing back in the 19th century, these competitions were apotheoses of excellence, the "Olympic Games of art."

For better or for worse

On a more practical level, competitions serve as events which lift us out of the ordinary routine. Every stage in the progress of the procedure, from the launch through to the award, offers various occasions for celebration. The very idea of competition creates a suspense which is maintained right

>> through to the proclamation of the winner. For example, a number of international competitions have ranked as high points in the history of architecture, attracting hundreds of competitors to enter prestige projects. Most of these were public but a number were also private, such as the competition for the *Chicago Tribune* building in 1922 (263 projects). Thanks to the huge media coverage, events such as the Beaubourg Centre competition in Paris in 1971 (681 projects) served their organisers as excellent tools for international promotion. They could also give rise to furious polemics, with frustrated losers denouncing the competition as rigged and making prophetic appeals to the judgement of history. Perhaps the greatest furore in this genre was stirred up by Le Corbusier following the competition for the League of Nations building in 1927 (377 projects), an occasion which permitted the "Moderns" to assert themselves as legitimate aspirants to the biggest public orders.

A tournament of architectural quality

In fact, the competition constitutes a kind of imposition: a project is chosen and this choice is presented as impartial because it is the outcome of free competition, despite the fact that architecture contains various notions of what quality means. The positive aspect of this procedure is that it offsets the arbitrary element existing in architecture by organising a competition and the fact that it produces a result is not the least of its benefits. To leave the smallest possible space for dispute, the competition sets itself out as "a jousting ground", "a world apart", governed by one rule, the competition over quality. The organiser starts by writing a "programme" which is, at one and the same time, a statement of the goal to be achieved and the contract between those taking part. This is the only document that the competitors and the jury need to know of. Each architect then retires to the privacy of his own studio to draw up his "project" isolated from any contact with the organiser or the jury. His proposal is submitted anonymously so that the competition is decided solely on the basis of the quality of the projects. Finally, the jury deliberates behind closed doors to avoid leaks or improper influences. The verdict of the jury, which is final and without appeal, is based, on the one hand, on a very concise report leaving the least possible

room for criticism and, on the other, on an exhibition of the projects to ensure the transparency of the competition. Once the procedure is over, the jury disperses and the projects are returned to their authors. While polemic may rage behind the scenes or in the press, the absence of any channel of appeal renders it more or less innocuous.

Public competitions: organisation as issue

For more than a century, the architectural profession has been using the organisation of public competitions as a lever to shape the market for public contracts to its own advantage. The main selling point is that the project is gifted, the architects putting up their work free of charge in procedures of public interest which result in only one winner and a host of losers. In return, the profession expects the public entities to respect a certain number of conditions, namely to comply with a standard for the organisation of competitions, to have recourse to the advice of an architect to write the programme, to appoint a jury with a majority of architects, to undertake to award the contract to the winner, etc. In Switzerland, this strategy has proved remarkably successful. For many years, the powerful SIA (Swiss Society of Engineers and Architects) had a virtual monopoly in the organisation of architectural competitions governed by a strict standard. Today, however, faced with competition from other professionals with regard to the regulation of competition (including particularly the Public Tenders Act), the architects have had to concede a diversification in the forms of the competitions (including particularly parallel studies mandates, designer-investor competitions, etc.). As a result, the standard (SIA 142) has become more flexible but at the same time less influential in shaping their professional identity.

Private competitions: excellence as the sole issue

Private competitions are not weighed down by this heavy load of symbolic or professional issues. As private operators are not bound by general agreements involving the public authorities, they remain free to organise competitions in which the sole issue is the production of a project of excellence generated by the spirit of competition between architects. This requires no more than a

minimal organisation and resources that are comparatively modest having regard to the intended aim, namely the design of buildings or spaces of a superior quality which create a brand image and enduring interest.

A private competition is an uncomplicated procedure requiring no more than common sense precautions that are easily implemented with a little attention and experience. The first step is to define precisely the challenge the architects have to face: the design of a building or simply a façade, the development of a building complex or simply a square or a garden, the quest for efficiency or the creation of a brand image and so forth. Next, it is necessary to decide who can take part. Private competitions generally invite a small number of architects who have been pre-selected on the basis of their experience or reputation and who may come from several countries if an international dimension is required. Those invited are guaranteed a reasonable remuneration and a firm commitment if they win. The next step is to establish the prerequisites of the competition, i.e. to bring together an authoritative jury, to write the programme and to fix the timetable. Finally, it is necessary to oversee the whole progress of the procedure, providing the best possible working conditions for the competitors and for the members of the jury. Each organiser will decide what level of publicity to give to the event: whether to keep it as a private event reserved for a small circle of insiders or to ensure a greater or lesser degree of media exposure, depending on the impact of the project and the resources available.

An uncomplicated procedure and a guaranteed result

Though no procedure can hope to solve all the problems of the world on its own, architectural competitions make it possible to produce projects of higher quality by stimulating a healthy rivalry between architects. Private competitions confine themselves to this basic function. They are effective and easy to organise with a minimum of care and experience. However, as soon as they assume other ambitions, they become more complex and more highly charged. We must avoid reducing them to a simple procedure and accept them for what they are – one of the stages for playing out our ambivalent relations with the idea of "free competition". ■

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