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Author

Cabanieu, Jacques

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Competitions and Architectural Excellence

Jacques Cabanieu

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 organized 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 clients, 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 give new designers a better chance, opening up commissions to young and even foreign candidates. And it stimulates creativity, contributing actively to the architectural debate of our time.

This procedure does have its disadvantages. 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 candidates 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 architectural 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 contract, in which the employer is free to accept or refuse the architect's proposal, 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 elaboration demanded in the competition allows the project to evolve. A competition 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 lie ahead before the project is finalized.

Competitions are now being organized for civil engineering structures, such as highway viaducts in mountainous regions or bridges over the Seine River in Paris. They have concerned urban design projects like the renovation of public squares and parks and urban renewal, as well as simple projects like water towers and cemeteries.

The systematic use of competitions can offer a good chance of improving architectural quality in public construction 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 hermetic clique of star architects wielding massive cultural power and a decrease in the importance of large architecture firms, the veritable industrialists of the profession.

Donlyn Lyndon: What is exciting about the competition system was not the result, not the fact that it was competition (although it's good to allow new stars to form). It 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 people acquire real understanding of the project, requiring the project really be understood through a technical assessment. 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 programs.

Robert Blaich: 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 competitions into both federal and state processes. Look at the scheme for public art, one percent mandated for public art in many federal, state and local projects. What if you put another one percent for a competition?

Stanley Tigerman: I don't think competitions are necessarily the answer by themselves, not in terms of architecture, urban design or planning. They often lead often to reinforcing the conventions.

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 connotations. 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.