Editorial

Architectural competitions I
- Exploring the phenomenon of competing in architecture and urban design

Editor's Comments

The combination of realising buildings with such architectural care that they become high-quality architecture and the momentum of introducing a competitive phase in this creative work may strike most people as odd. However, the phenomenon dates back to the Olympic Games of Ancient Greece, where the harmony between aesthetics and architectural realisation was assessed in a public voting process.[1]

In Renaissance Florence, this rendering of written programming requirements into architectural visions was rediscovered. Over the following centuries, the architecture competition was further refined and integrated in the Beaux Arts tradition of training architects. At the realisation of the modern welfare society of the western hemisphere, the architectural competition has become a twofold tool for conceptualising socio-political welfare goals and constituting an arena for best practice of architectural production and evaluation. However, despite the quite substantial ramification of the simple idea of introducing a competitive element in the conception of architecture, knowledge about the fundamental dynamics of architectural competitions is still very much an unexplored phenomenon.

The first scholarly approach to mapping the research field of architectural competitions as a phenomenon and practice was made as late as 2008, when the first conference with this particular focus was realised at the School of Architecture, at the Royal Institute of Technology, KTH, Stockholm, Sweden. This first call for papers in this area of research answered a latent research interest, not only in the Nordic countries, but as well as in a wider European context, and spread in ever widening circles outside the old continent. In 2010, a second conference was organised by the Copenhagen Business School, CBS, in Copenhagen, Denmark. This was soon to be followed by other conferences. The year 2012 was a particularly fruitful year for the consolidation of the new research field of architectural competitions, seen as a societal phenomenon and a trans-disciplinary practice: In March that year, the Université de Montréal, Quebec, Canada realised the third conference, which literally forged a link between the European research interest with the new world, Canada, Brazil, and the US. In October 2012, the fourth conference on architectural competitions opened at the Aalto University in Helsinki, Finland, as a parallel track to the annual Finnish conferences on architecture and research. The conferences have generated about twenty papers per venue. The hope is that an even larger number will be presented at the fifth and up-coming conference at the Technological University of Delft, TU, The Netherlands in February 2014.

A special characteristic of the conferences that have already been realised is the broad spectrum of openings towards the research field, but also the approach to include several research disciplines, not to mention the all-inclusive welcome of contributions from both young and not so young researchers. A special aim of all of the realised conferences on architectural competitions has been to create an arena for new researchers to assemble and present a scientific paper as part of their forthcoming Ph D thesis in architecture, or in neighbouring disciplines. For the conference in Helsinki, about half the papers were submitted by Ph D candidates from Canada, Finland, France, Sweden, and the UK. Given the ample number of contributions to each conference, a special task for the conference organisers is the

dissemination of new findings on the phenomenon and practice of architectural competitions. In consequence, a selection of papers from the first scientific conference was published in the Nordic Journal of Architectural Research, 2009, No 2/3, followed by a book publication in 2012, Architectural Competitions, research inquiries and experience,[2] the second one resulted in an issue of the Scandinavian Journal of Management, 2011, No 1, in the Geographica Helvetica, 2011, Heft 1, and in the Nordic Journal of Architecture, 2012, No 1. The contributions for the third conference are still in the process of being published, but some of the papers in French have been published in a special issue of the French journal d'a, Que savons-nous des concours? [What do we know about architectural competitions?].[3] In addition, a second book on architectural competitions, entitled Architectural competitions – stories and practices,[4] was published in May 2014 with some contributions from the session on architectural competitions in the conference in Helsinki 2012 combined with a special invitation to researchers in the field.

Given the increasing interest in research about architectural competitions and its implications as a societal phenomenon and professional practice, it is therefore logical to seek the opportunity to publish a selection of papers that were submitted for the fourth conference on architectural competitions in Helsinki in 2012. For this reason, the Norwegian journal of FORMakademisk has offered to publish a blind peer-reviewed sample of eight papers. We are pleased that the journal found our idea interesting, and it is with great pleasure that we can now offer the readers of the journal two special issues of FORMakademisk with a particular focus on architectural competitions called Architectural Competitions I, exploring the phenomenon of competing in architecture and urban design and Architectural Competitions II, the dynamics of competing in architecture and urban design. All of the papers were reviewed by independent reviewers in Europe and the US, who have supplied detailed assessments of each paper. In response to these reviews, the authors have revised their papers, and the final outcome of this work process is the papers that are now to be published in the journal.The dominant share of the accepted papers that were selected for publication is contributions from young researchers, who are in the process of finalising their Ph D thesis. Three contributions are written by experienced scholars.

The four papers of this issue of FORMakademisk can be grouped under the headline of the first theme: *Architectural competitions I, exploring the phenomenon of competing in architecture and urban design*. This sample of articles demonstrates the variety in the execution of architectural competitions around the world. Each paper has a geographical location, and, seen as an entity, the present issue is a cavalcade of how architectural competitions materialise in Australia, China, France, Greece and the UK. The four papers extrapolate characteristics of the use of the competition instrument in the traditional European manner, including intriguing deviations, versus experimental and liberal realisations in other countries that have aimed at expanding and redefining the concept of architectural competition. Thus, the instrument can be used in innovative ways for finding solutions for architecture and building-related matters of the evolving welfare societies. The papers touch the underlying question of the effectiveness of an architectural competition: Do architectural competitions *per se* renew the built environment, or are the structures of architectural competitions in need of innovation?

The cavalcade opens with a contribution by **Loïse Lenne**, Ph D Fellow at the Université Paris-Est Créteil Val de Marne, France. She forwards two competitions of the late 1970s, which allow her to do a comparative study between conditions for architectural competitions in France and the UK. The study is entitled: *The Premises of the Event; are architectural competitions incubators for events?* The most apparent difference between the two cultural opposites in European history is the profile of the organiser, in France it is the state, and in the UK a large insurance company. In both cases, the winning proposals of the

competitions were to be realised, and the final outcomes of the two decision-making and planning processes, spiced by aesthetical and political debates, can be admired in London and Paris. Lenne's first case refers to the architectural competition in 1978 for the new head office for the Lloyd's Insurance Company. Although the author has termed the process behind the new office building an architectural competition, Lenne points out that the process deviates considerably from what is known as being the basic requirements for a competition: a detailed competition programme, and a number of participating architects. In the Lloyd case, ulterior motives of the organiser resulted in a flexible programme that a selection of prestigious architectural firms was to conceptualise into architecture. Lenne's second case refers to the architectural competition in 1982, which would propel a Danish architect and scholar to world fame, the Grande Arche at the La Défense area in Paris. In this case, the architectural competition assumed the form of a competition open for any architect, French or international. However, as the far north focal point of the parade street La Champs Elysée, a building at this site became a matter for the French state, and ultimately the president. Hence, even in this case, the competition process deviated from what could be considered a normal process for realising an architectural competition, since the jury deliberations would include emblematic architects and experts of national and international reputation. Loïse Lenne's overarching conclusion is that some architectural competitions, given the combination of a specific design task, geographical location and cultural context at hand, turn into societal events with both historic and spatial implications.

The second contribution to the present issue could be seen as the demonstration of the conclusions of the previous paper: The two authors **Zheng Liang**, Ph D Fellow, and professor **Raine Mäntysal**, both at the Department of Real Estate, Planning and Geoinformatics, YTK Land Use Planning and Urban Studies Group, School of Engineering, Aalto University, Finland, explore the dynamics of the international design competition of the city of Baietan, Guangzhou, China. The study is entitled: *Contemporary large-scale international design competitions in China, a case study of Baietan, Guangzhou* . This competition was realized in 2008. The authors demonstrate how architectural competitions in modern China include design assignments of a larger magnitude than what has hitherto been seen in Finland and other European countries. Propelled by economic growth and China's integration in the world trade organisation, WTO, the Chinese design competitions are part of the country's currently rapid adaptation to globalisation and internationalisation. As such, these competitions juxtapose various interests of stakeholders, who are part of the civil administration, the political hemisphere or the financial markets. Despite the obvious plethora of differing core interests at stake, the Chinese design competitions often lack the necessary systematic analysis of possible conflicting interests that can be associated with the design assignment. In order to demonstrate this shortcoming, Liang and Mäntysal identify the dynamics of a particular Chinese design competition, the Baietan case. In this case, the competition was closely connected with the strategic plan for developing the city, which implied the characteristical large-scale scope of many Chinese competitions, and its association with political ambitions for the city and the region. As such, the direct relation between the individual user of the built environment becomes less apparent, and other objectives of a more rational and preformative character are forwarded. The authors suggest that the Baietan design competition exemplifies a new role of the architectural competition as a phenomenon: in Chinacompetitions supply a ground for harmonising disparate interests into mutual agreements, or *"designed trading zones."* In order to promote this exchange, the competition is less structured in China than in Europe, and, thus open to new ideas in design thinking and urban planning, previously tested in an international context.

The third contribution for this issue is also geographically situated in the eastern hemisphere, in this case, Australia and the development of new mobile educational space.

Associate professor **Clare Newton** and associate researcher **Sarah Backhouse**, both at the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, at the University of Melbourne, Australia, suggest that architectural competitions are eminent strategic instruments for generating new architectural ideas for upcoming problems and the future. The study is entitled: *Competing in Architecture; Crowdsourcing as a Research Tool*. The authors present a research-based project that aimed at redefining relocatable schools, which accommodate up to 30 per cent of government school students in some states. Despite the considerable number of students, these temporary buildings are not given the same design attention as the permanent buildings. As a consequence, the *Future Proofing Schools Design Ideas Competition* was initiated as an open-ideas competition to challenge the design community to innovate this type of building. The project also received special research funding from the Australian Research Council in order to promote a type of participatory processes between representatives from academia and from market interests, here termed crowdsourcing by the authors. In this aspect, the use of architectural competitions as a means to define new guidelines for architectural space has some relevance to the three Scandinavian countries Denmark, Norway and Sweden. In these countries, competitions concerning housing, schools and various types of healthcare architecture have produced recommendations that have been closely intertwined with socio-political goals of the modern welfare state.[5] However, as Newton and Backhouse state, the competition process in Australia is largely based on the organisational framework of the Royal British Institute of British Architects, RIBA. This particular case was developed through a three-step procedure: development of the competition programme; the competition period and with dissemination activities for the participating architects; and the jury analyses of the submitted proposals and how the jury assessments could be applied in a real-world context. The authors' overall conclusion states that the competition programme can be seen as an educative document that promotes that designers make strategic decisions to focus on particular aspects of the envisioned architecture.

The fourth contribution completes the cavalcade of architectural competitions seen in a worldwide context, and takes us back to the origins of the architectural competition. The author **Angelos Psilopoulos**, Adjunct Lecturer, Faculty of Fine Arts and Design, Department of Interior Architecture Decoration and Design, Technological Educational Institute of Athens, Greece, is sceptic of the implementation of architectural competition as a public instrument to steer and promote the development of new architectural space. Instead, the author makes an inventory of the dynamics of three recent architectural competitions that were realised by individual stakeholders over the years 2005 to 2008, either representing construction and real estate developers or the Greek professional association for architects. As a backdrop to these initiatives, the author investigates the new governmental policy for forth-coming competitions in architecture and design, and the possible implication of this new policy. The ultimate research question is how these competitions promote architectural quality in the public building sector. The study is entitled: *A new call for quality, shifting the paradigm for development policy in Greece through competitions*. The paper has a qualitative research scope, and explores the narratives of key actors, who were involved in the four case studies in order to extract a common denominator that refers to architectural quality. The common denominator of these narratives of four different architectural competitions refers to a type of personal vocation to improve quality in public architecture. By emphasising this faith in the project, the informants are convinced that the final outcome of the project will display an increased level of architectural quality. Psilopoulos understands this personal devotion to the project by the key stakeholder as an immaterial asset that may or may not result in an improved level in Greek architectural thinking. For the author, this belief among stakeholders makes architectural competitions similar to a unifying history and myth, which glues various interests together in a quest for better architectural space. Hence, the author

defines architectural competitions as an ever increasing urge to reinvent space by the participants: architectural competitions are indeed a process, but the fair question is whether a certain process can have a universal impact on architectural thinking.

The cavalcade with the four articles highlights the assumption that architectural competitions come to their true powers by use of their structural framework. This framework nourishes a driving force that presupposes the gradual, but finally complete, inclusion of all stakeholders, i.e. both the full body of the organisers, presumably the client and the future end users, and the participating architects along with other building experts, activated when the winning proposal of a competition enters the phase of realisation. Ultimately, this force will accomplish a multi-dimensional piece of architecture. This unique *masterpiece of architecture* will entice and inspire others to push high-quality architecture yet another step up the imaginary ladder that leads to new and inspiring artistic experiences. To say the least, all four authors claim that architectural competitions are inspirational for everyone, who engage in a close encounter with the phenomenon. Yet, this stance also demonstrates the complexity of doing research about architectural competitions: this is a phenomenon that transgresses every boundary and restriction. It requires a trans-disciplinary approach and a mix of research methods to come close to understanding the inherent driving forces of a competition: Architectural competitions refer to ideological thinking, defined formats and tangible architectural space, but it is first and foremost a mind-blowing aesthetical and spatial experience!

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